NUMBER 6

MAMMOTH WESTERN

DECEMBER 1946

MAMMOTH WESTERN

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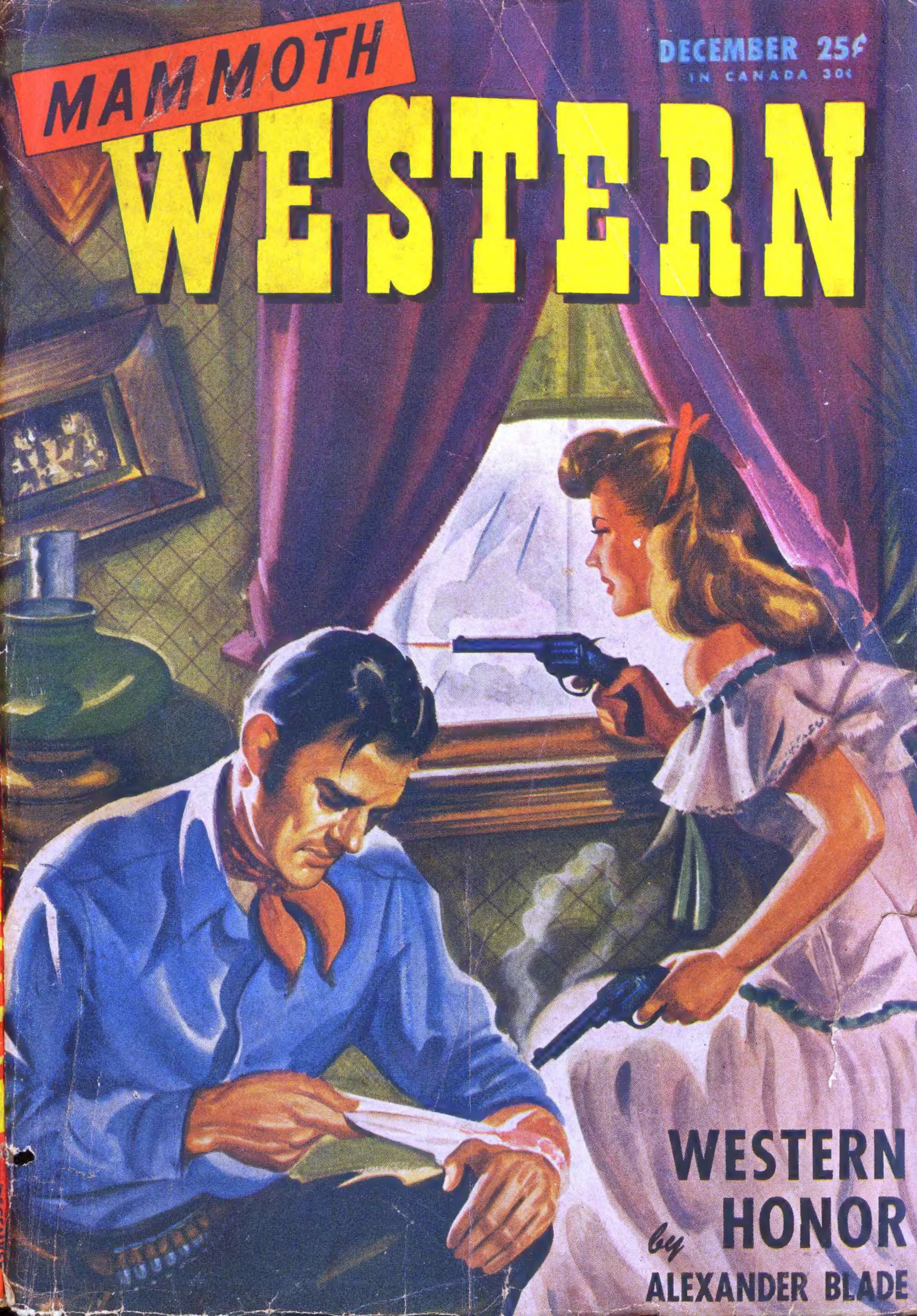

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There are some things more valuable than victory—and even in defeat Swift Pony had his pride.

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Front cover painting by Arnold Kohn, illustrating a scene from "Western Honor"

MAMMOTH
WESTERN
DECEMBER
1946

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Volume 2
Number 6

RIDIN' HERD *with the Editor*

EARLY last month Robert Moore Williams popped in on us from St. Louis and asked us how we were set for novelettes for *Mammoth Western.* "Not so hot," we said, and he delved into his briefcase. "By some weird freak of chance I happen to have a western novelette with me . . . and by the way, I happen to have that short western you asked for, too." Well, there you are, readers—it just "happens" that we couldn't turn down two such terrific yarns, nor could we hold 'em from you just because it isn't usually the practice to have the same name appear twice on one contents page. We don't think Emily Post ever "laid down the law" on such procedure anyway, so if a rule has been busted, let 'er rip! ". . . And A Gun" is the title of the novelette, and the short is called "Tascosa Partners." We're sure you agree we're right in "busting rules".

WILLIAM HOPSON sandwiches in a novelette between novels with a nice piece of work in "Death At The Waterhole". Bill's in New York now, doing "blood, sweat and ink" work on a Satevepost yarn. That's allus the way it is—these slick magazines keep trying to steal our writers away from us. But just the same, Bill's doing a new novel for us that ought to hit you in the next issue—or at the very latest, the issue after that.

"THUNDER OVER THE MESA" is one of those noisy titles you can't tell about before you read the story. Berkeley Livingston wrote this one, and we think it lives up to its title. It ought to lift you right out of your chair when the bolt hits you. Right entertainin', says we.

LEONARD FINLEY HILTS, ex-naval aviator who crash-landed on a dummy carrier and was picked up in a basket, doesn't show any signs of the basket today! The surgeons put him together like new, and must have sewed in a copy of "plotto", as it should be quite obvious when you read "The Pride Of Swift Pony" that he's the lad who can write the "different" story for anybody's money. This isn't exactly in the tradition of the "western" story, but it has the flavor of the plains in every line.

E. K. JARVIS does "Chicago Man" and you can get some sort of idea of what it's about from the title. When a man from Chicago hits the west, you can bet the hot lead tastes the same no matter where you sling it. Here's action that will take you places and back again.

"WESTERN HONOR" by Alexander Blade (our cover illustration is based on it) is a story about a wagging tongue that is stopped by a wagging gun. Sometimes that's the only way to put a halt to gossip—and maybe it's a good way!

ABOUT five years ago we ran across a writer named Emil Petaja through an agent named Julius Schwartz to whom we'll be indebted for a long time. Emil has that faculty of putting down just a few words and making you think you've read a novel. You won't take much time reading "Yellow Streak" but you'll find that it was time well spent.

CHESTER S. GEIER lost his hearing many years ago, which seems to have been a blessing in disguise. He is able to concentrate at his typewriter with an intentness that means letter-perfect copy. No interruptions for him! Anyway, you'll find that perfection quite evident in "Water Lode" which is a story about—oop, there we go, trying to spoil it for you like the guy who's already seen the picture and can't keep his trap shut.

"FUNNY ABOUT BEES" muses Ben Frank. "They seem to behave in strange ways sometimes. Guess I'll write a story about 'em, and see what happens." Well, a western story happened, believe it or not, and we give it to you with delight. It's an unusual little yarn, and we know you'll agree that it is "funny about bees".

HAVE you noticed the word "Mammoth" in connection with other magazine titles; such as: "Mammoth Adventure", "Mammoth Detective", "Mammoth Mystery"? Well, those magazines are sister magazines to "Mammoth Western" and they are put out in the same office by the same group of "pulp-happy" editors—and if you like this magazine, you can make up your mind you'll find the same quality in the others. So, if you run short of reading material, just go "mammoth" hunting. You'll make a "kill" every time.

WITH that little "plug" we'll ride off into the purple distance (ah!) and begin thinking about our next issue. Until then . . . *Rap.*

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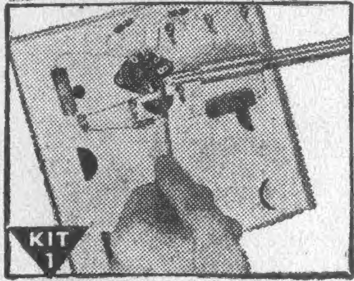
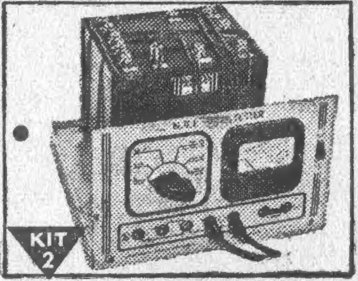


KIT 1

I send you Soldering Equipment and Radio Parts; show you how to do Radio soldering; how to mount and connect Radio parts; give you practical experience.



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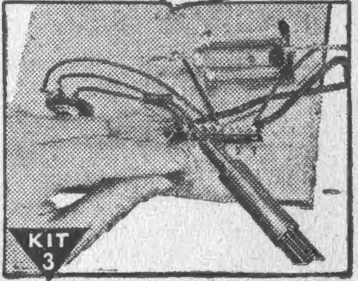
Early in my course I show you how to build this N.R.I. Tester with parts I send. It soon helps you fix neighborhood Radios and earn EXTRA money in spare time.



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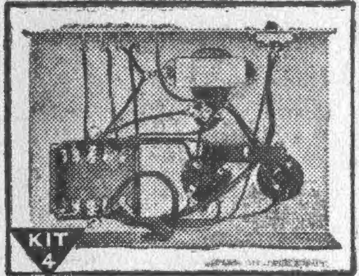
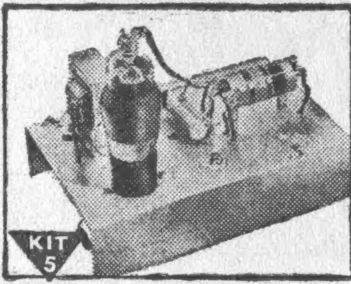
You get parts to build Radio Circuits; then test them; see how they work; learn how to design special circuits; how to locate and repair circuit defects.



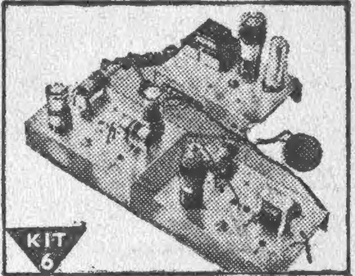
KIT 4

You get parts to build this Vacuum Tube Power Pack; make changes which give you experience with packs of many kinds; learn to correct power pack troubles.



KIT 5

Building this A. M. Signal Generator gives you more valuable experience. It provides amplitude-modulated signals for many tests and experiments.



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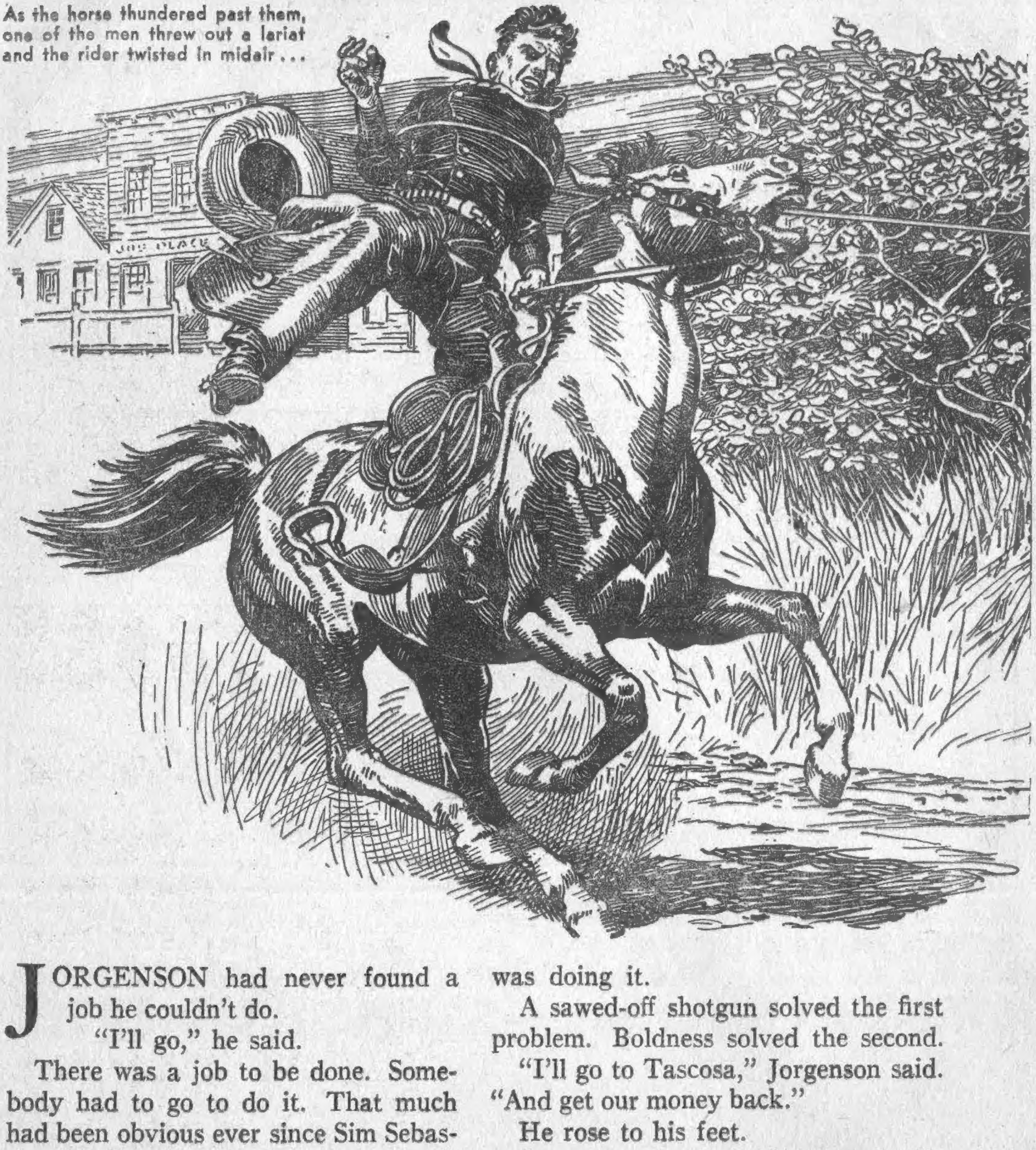
As the horse thundered past them, one of the men threw out a lariat and the rider twisted in midair . . .



JORGENSON had never found a job he couldn't do.

"I'll go," he said.

There was a job to be done. Somebody had to go to do it. That much had been obvious ever since Sim Sebastion had brought the bloody, battered, and barely alive Cal Jones into the cabin. Jorgenson had never for a moment questioned that he was the man to do the job.

Ever since he had seen Cal Jones and had heard his story, he had been thinking about the job to be done. There were two problems to be solved. One of them was how to do the job. The other was how to stay alive while he was doing it.

A sawed-off shotgun solved the first problem. Boldness solved the second.

"I'll go to Tascosa," Jorgenson said. "And get our money back."

He rose to his feet.

Jorgenson stood six feet two in his bare feet. He was as strong as two ordinary men. Because he was stronger, and maybe a shade smarter, than most, he was something of a lone wolf. Having never found a job he couldn't do alone, he had never learned how to let anyone help him. Nor had he really learned the meaning of the word *partner* even though he had three of them.

Sim Sebastion, Ron Carter, and Cal

TASCOSA PARTNERS

by Robert Moore Williams

You can do a job right alone and still be alive afterwards if you're smart enough. But a time may come when you'll need help.

Jones, his three partners, watched him as he strode across the room and took the double barrel sawed-off shotgun from the antler prongs on the wall. Opening the breech, he slipped two buckshot-loaded shells into the barrels, put four more shells into his pockets. He took two blankets from the empty bunk and wrapped them around the shotgun. Then, using slip knots, he tied both ends of the blankets with a piece of rope, slipped them over his back, the rope coming across his chest.

The blankets looked like an ordinary bedding roll. A buffalo hunter, a wandering cowboy, even an outlaw riding the long trail, might carry a bedroll like this. The shotgun in the blankets was completely concealed.

His partners watched him in speculative silence. He took a box of .45 caliber pistol cartridges from the shelf over the fireplace and filled the empty loops in his pistol belt. He checked his gun, made certain that the barrel was perfectly clean and that the cylinder turned smoothly and easily. Then he stepped out the door. When he returned a few moments later he was rubbing mud on the walnut grips of his pistol.

THE mud was an artistic touch. He smeared it liberally on the handle of the gun, slid the pistol into its holster, looked at Jones lying on the bed.

"What was the name of that gambler who held you up?"

Cal Jones tried to lift his bandaged head from the pillow. The effort was beyond his strength. His left arm was broken and there was a slug through his right lung, both relics of the town of Tascosa.

"Hewitt," Cal Jones whispered. "He's a—little man—with a crooked nose."

"Where does he hang out?"

"When I first saw him—he was playing for the house—in the Red Dog saloon. I guess that's his hang out."

"You sure he's the man?"

"I'm—dead certain of it. His first shot—knocked me off my horse and broke my arm. He came out from behind the bushes—and I got a good look at him—before he shot the second time. He's the man all right."

"And how much did he get?"

"Thirty-eight hundred. It was all—in twenty-dollar gold pieces. That's the way—the construction gang at Trinidad paid me—when I delivered the steers to them."

"Thanks," Jorgenson said. He picked up his hat, turned toward the door.

"Wait," Cal Jones whispered from the bed.

Jorgenson hesitated. "What is it, Cal?"

"Wait until tomorrow," Cal Jones begged. "I'll have some of my strength back then—and I'll go with you."

Cal Jones must have known that tomorrow might never come for him. He had been left for dead in the road and his life still hung in the balance. In spite of this, he wanted to go to Tascosa with Jorgenson.

Jones' request startled Jorgenson. More than that, it somehow sent a warm glow through the big man. Near death, Jones was still trying to help him. Jorgenson appreciated the effort, but he shook his head.

"Tomorrow may be too late, Cal," he said gently. "Hewitt may be gone by then. I can't wait, Cal. I've got to go today."

"Then—I'll go with you, now."

Jones tried to sit up in bed. Sim Sebastion and Ron Carter, sitting beside him, hastily but gently grabbed his shoulders. Jones thrust a foot over the edge of the bed.

"No, Cal," Jorgenson said.

"I got us into this," Jones argued.

"You can't help an ambush, Cal." Although Jorgenson didn't say it, he had the feeling that anybody who ran into an ambush was not up on his toes.

"But we need that money bad," Jones argued.

"And I'll get it for us, Cal."

"I'm your partner. It's my right to help you."

Jorgenson shook his head. Jones tried to thrust his other foot over the edge of the bed. The effort was too much for him. He coughed heavily, his strength failed. Sebastion and Carter hastily helped him to lie back down. Jorgenson went quickly out of the cabin, closed the door behind him.

He knew Cal Jones was a hopeless fool for trying to help him in his present condition but Jones' desire to help was a warm and friendly thing.

THERE were eight horses in the corral. Jorgenson looked them over carefully. He knew that the man who rode a good horse into Tascosa was taking a chance of having it stolen if left unguarded for a moment. He put his rope on the sorriest-looking mount in the bunch, an animal so nearly worthless that even the lowest horse thief would not stoop to steal it. He was tightening the cinches on his heavy silver-mounted saddle when his two partners emerged from the cabin. He watched them walk toward him.

Sim Sebastion was thin and slender. His frosty blue eyes were as bright as ever but the stoop of age was beginning to appear in his back. Sebastion wasn't a young man any longer. He walked with the shuffling gait of a man who has spent much of his life in the saddle.

Ron Carter was much younger and much bigger. Carter was as strong as a mule but like that animal, he was also heavy and slow-moving.

Neither an old man nor a slow-moving man would be able to help Jorgenson in Tascosa. He waited until they came up to him.

"We think we better go with you," Sim Sebastion said bluntly.

"That's right," Ron Carter nodded in agreement. "There ain't no law in Tascosa. There never has been. The town is a damned sight too tough for one man."

"I'm not going to fight the town," Jorgenson answered. "I'm going after one man."

He swung into the saddle.

"Jorge!" Sebastion said sharply.

"I can do the job," Jorgenson said. "You two stay here and take care of Cal."

Touching his pony's flank with a spur, he rode away. His two partners watched him in silence. Hard riding would get him to Tascosa by night. He wanted to reach his destination just after dark.

Tall and lean, Jorgenson had an easy seat in the saddle. Born in Missouri, he had come west when he was barely sixteen, following the growing tide of migration that was flowing into Texas after the Civil War. He had been successively a horse wrangler with the trail herds, then a regular hand, then a *segundo*, then, always moving up, he had been a full trail boss taking herds into Dodge.

Extension of the rail lines westward —construction at this time had reached Trinidad, Colorado, ten day's ride to the north—had ended the cattle drives to Dodge. By the time this had happened, Jorgenson was ready to quit the trail. He had discovered there wasn't much money to be made by working for the other fellow. The money lay in owning cows, not in taking care of cattle owned by somebody else. Jorgenson knew cattle. He had saved his salary. Using the money he had saved, he had gone into partnership with Sebastion, Carter, and Jones. They operated under the Z brand.

Although it had been started on a shoe-string, the Z brand gave every prospect of being a profitable venture. The four men knew cattle, his three partners had range-savvy, and they were willing to work.

CAL JONES had taken the first bunch of Z cattle north and sold them to the railroad construction gangs near Trinidad. It was a small bunch of steers but the $3800.00 he had received for the beef represented the first income of the Z brand. That money would keep the four partners going. Without it, they would also be going—going bust.

Jorgenson rode northeast. He crossed the two enormous gashes in the Plains known as the Palo Duro. Deer and antelope were plentiful here. He saw them on every side. There were mustangs and mavericks here too, and an occasional buffalo, haunting a half-empty water-hole or loping lazily in play across an almost barren plain.

The day of the buffalo in this section of the Great Plains was past. The buffalo hunters had thinned the huge shaggy animals to the point of virtual extinction. The buffalo hunters had moved farther west.

Jorgenson, like most ranchers and cowmen, had only contempt for the buffalo hunters. He regarded them as the off-scourings of civilization and was glad that the majority of them had moved out of the country following the game.

All of them, he knew, had not left. The worst of the lot, those too shiftless to hunt and too worthless to work, the off-scourings of the off-scourings, lived in or around Tascosa. Night was falling when Jorgenson saw the town from the distance of about a mile. His horse clip-clopped down the main street in the gathering darkness.

There was only one street in Tascosa and it was more of a road than a street. The Red Dog saloon was a one story log building on the right side of the street. Jorgenson rode past without turning his head. He stopped in front of a ramshackle log structure that had the crudely lettered sign LIVERY STABLE above the door.

"I want my horse fed," he said to the surly proprietor.

"That'll be a dollar, in advance," was the answer.

Jorgenson paid the dollar. He led his horse into a stall and personally saw that the animal was fed before he sought food for himself.

There was no restaurant in Tascosa. His own meal was two cans of sardines with cheese and crackers in the general store.

Neither the owner of the livery stable nor the proprietor of the store asked him any questions. His name, where he had come from, and where he was going, were his own business.

Nobody in Tascosa asked a stranger his business. Such questions were not considered polite. Jorgenson spent an hour munching crackers, sardines, and cheese, then went back to the livery stable where he had left his horse. He saddled and bridled the pony, rode down the main street, dismounted one door away from the Red Dog saloon. He used a slip noose to tie his horse to the hitching rack. A single jerk of the reins would free them.

He chose not to tie his pony in front of the Red Dog for two reasons. The first reason, a man mounting a horse in front of the saloon was an easy target for a shot through the two front windows of the place. The second reason for choosing this particular spot was an opening between two buildings. When he came out of the Red Dog, he could spur his horse directly through the opening between the two buildings and thus escape running down the main street where again he would be a target.

He used a slipknot in the reins because he expected to mount in one hell of a hurry when he came out of the saloon.

He checked the slipknots on his bedding roll, gave the whole roll a hitch so that it rode easily on his shoulders. He pushed open the door and entered the saloon.

THE bar was at the back. There was a side door at the right. To the left was a big cast-iron stove. The gambling tables were also to the left. Three smoky coal oil lamps shed a wan illumination over the fifteen to twenty persons present.

When he entered the door, Jorgenson had the instant attention of perhaps two thirds of the men in the soloon. He was a stranger. These men were instantly wary of him. Here and there around the room hands moved a little closer to holstered weapons.

Two thirds of 'em either dodgin' the law or dodgin' personal enemies, he thought. The other third aren't much worried about strangers.

He walked up to the bar.

"Whiskey," he said.

He turned to the group. "Be glad to have you gentlemen drink with me."

"Free whiskey!" the bartender sang out. "Line up and name if you want it mixed or straight."

It was an invitation that was seldom or never refused. With the exception of five men playing poker at one of the tables on the left, every person in the saloon lined up at the bar. Jorgenson glanced at the card players.

One of them was a rat-like little man with a crooked nose. Was this Hewitt? He suspected it was but he didn't know. Crooked Nose was smoking a cigar and studying the cards in his hands. Stacks of twenty-dollar gold pieces were lined up on the table in front of him.

"Aren't the card players drinkin'?" Jorgenson asked the bartender.

"Sure, they're drinkin'," the bartender answered. "Hewitt, what'll you and the boys have?"

Crooked Nose looked up. He stared at Jorgenson for a split second, then glanced back at his hand.

"We'll have cigars instead," he said.

Jorgenson had found his man. The twenty-dollar gold pieces on the table in front of Crooked Nose showed he had found the money too. He hitched his bedding roll to an easier position on his back.

"Give me the box of cigars," he said to the bartender. "I'll take the gents their smokes."

The bartender slid the box of cigars across the bar. Jorgenson picked it up. Silence fell in the room.

Most of the men in this place were on the dodge. Men on the dodge develop a keen sense of danger. Some of them sensed danger now. They didn't do it openly but out of the corner of their eyes they watched this big stranger who had come into the saloon. What they saw was a tired-looking but big cowpuncher with a bedding roll slung across his back. He was walking across the room to deliver the cigars he had bought, to the men he had bought them for. It was a polite thing to do. True, this big waddie had a gun on his hip, but so did every other man in the place except the bartender and he had a gun under the bar. If Jorgenson hadn't been carrying a gun, they would have known something was wrong with him. If he hadn't had a gun in sight, they would have suspected he had one hidden, and they would have looked closely to see where. But he had a gun in plain sight.

They could even see the mud on the butt of his gun. Nobody who expected to use a gun would ever leave caked mud on the handle.

HEWITT glanced up when he saw Jorgenson coming with the box of cigars. His hand went under the table and his eyes narrowed. He looked this big stranger over very closely. He also saw the mud caked on the butt of the pistol. It was a reasurring sight, that mud.

Jorgenson set the box of cigars on the poker table.

"Excuse me for interruptin' your game," he said. "But help yourselves to some cigars."

Two of the men reached immediately for the cigars. The man on Hewitt's left hesitated, then accepted. Hewitt eyed Jorgenson. Crooked Nose had eyes that were half-yellow and half-green.

Jorgenson met the stare. "Have a cigar, friend," he urged.

Hewitt's hand slowly came out from under the table.

Jorgenson reached up to steady the bedding roll. Hewitt glanced at the box of cigars. He started to select one. Jorgenson gently tugged at the rope on his bedding roll. The knot gave. The blankets started to come loose.

"Dang that knot," he muttered. "I'll bet I tie it this time so it stays tight."

He lifted the bedding roll over his shoulder. His hands went inside the blankets. His fingers closed around the butt of the shotgun.

"Take all the cigars," he urged. "Then put nine of those stacks of gold pieces into the empty cigar box."

The tone of his voice jerked Hewitt's eyes up to him. Crooked Nose found himself looking into the twin barrels of the shotgun.

Jorgenson stepped back from the table, placed himself so that his gun covered the men at the bar, the bartender, and the card players.

"Don't anybody move!" he ordered. "That goes especially for you, Hewitt."

In the Red Dog saloon at that moment no one showed any signs of wanting to do any moving. The men in this place knew guns. Jorgenson had taken their knowledge into consideration when he chose the shotgun to hide in his bedding roll.

A pistol they would have respected. The Colt was a deadly weapon all right. A Colt would have held them motionless for a minute, maybe two minutes. At the end of that time, out of fifteen to twenty desperate men somebody would have figured he could take a chance on a Colt. Somebody would have gambled on a six-gun.

The men in this saloon knew better than to try to gamble with a shotgun. When they saw the shotgun in Jorgenson's hands, they froze where they were standing.

"I got business with only one man in this saloon," Jorgenson said. "If nobody else moves, nobody else is going to get hurt."

Stun them for a second with the shotgun. Then tell them he wanted only one man. That would keep the pack off him. That would keep some desperate man from making a break.

"You, Hewitt—"

Crooked Nose wet thin lips with the tip of his tongue. His yellow eyes were unwavering in their stare.

"Have you got twenty gold pieces in each of those stacks in front of you?" Jorgenson asked.

Hewitt nodded slowly.

"Then put nine stacks in that cigar box."

CROOKED NOSE was surprised. If Jorgenson had said to put all the gold pieces in front of him into the cigar box, he would have understood what was happening. This would have been just a hold-up. But when the big cowpuncher demanded nine stacks, it surprised a question out of him.

"Why nine stacks?"

"That's what you took off my partner yesterday," Jorgenson answered. "That's what I'm taking back tonight."

"Your partner!" Sudden understanding glinted in Hewitt's eyes. "But—"

"You left him for dead, didn't you?" Jorgenson answered. "Anyhow that's what you thought! *Start dumping gold into that cigar box, you tin-horn gambler, before I blow your guts all over this saloon and take the money out of your estate!*"

When he wanted to use it, Jorgenson had an edge on his voice that would curl the hide on a three-year old steer. He used it now. There was sudden death in that voice. There was boiling anger in it. Here was the man who had bushwhacked Cal Jones, left him for dead in the road. Jorgenson's finger itched on the trigger of his gun when he thought about Cal.

Hewitt heard the tones of sudden

death in Jorgenson's voice. He hastily dumped nine stacks of gold pieces into the cigar box. Listening to that voice, looking at that shotgun, only a crazy fool would have done anything else.

"Toss one of them to the barkeep to pay for the drinks and the cigars," Jorgenson ordered. The hot edge of his anger was cooling a little. He was beginning to think about getting away. Lifting the now heavy cigar box from the table, he stuffed it inside his shirt.

Keeping his back to the wall and his eyes on the crowd, he moved toward the door. Reaching behind him, he lifted the latch with his left hand, opened the door. He stepped outside.

A stampede started inside the saloon.

"Get that bastard!" he heard Hewitt scream.

He was ready for the stampede. He had anticipated what would happen the second he left the saloon. He stepped quickly to one of the front windows, lifted the shotgun to his shoulder. It roared heavily.

Over the tinkle of falling glass came the sound of men hitting the floor. The stampede of moving feet stopped.

Jorgenson grinned. He had aimed high. The buckshot hadn't done any damage except to the window but the rattle of the heavy slugs inside the saloon had stopped all activity. He turned, ran for his horse.

He still hadn't found a job he couldn't do. This had been easy. All he had needed was a shotgun and boldness.

HE FOUND the hitching rack where he had tied his horse, reached for the reins. He didn't find them. For a second he fumbled in the darkness.

Then he realized his horse was gone.

While he had been holding up the saloon, one of the thieves in Tascosa had stolen his horse.

"Who in the devil would steal that plug? The saddle! Damn me for a fool! I forgot my silver-mounted saddle. They stole the horse for the saddle!"

Although he had deliberately chosen a horse that would not attract the eye of even a Tascosa horse thief, he had forgotten that his saddle was a valuable and expensive piece of riding equipment. He was so accustomed to using it that he had forgotten it was valuable in the eyes of other men.

Jorgenson was afoot in Tascosa.

In that moment, possibly for the first time in his life, he realized that sometimes even the strongest, the bravest, and the smartest man may need help. If he had let either Sebastian or Carter come with him, they could have guarded the horses while he held up the saloon. They could have covered his retreat. If—!

Carter and Sebastian were back at the Z ranch and he was alone in Tascosa.

With a thud that rattled its hinges, the door of the Red Dog saloon was kicked open.

In split seconds Jorgenson knew that men would be boiling out all the doors in the saloon. With a horse, he could have made a clean getaway. On foot—

He ran between the two buildings. At the back end of the log structure the ends of the logs made a kind of a ladder that an agile man could use to climb to the roof. Jorgenson used that ladder. Hooking his heels in the wooden eaves trough, he lay flat on his back on the roof.

On foot, he couldn't escape. All he could do was hide. Sometime during the night—if he could stay out of sight and stay alive, maybe he could get his hands on a horse.

Fifteen minutes later every saloon in Tascosa had disgorged its occupants out into the street. The story of how some lone hand had held up Hewitt in the Red Dog saloon had been told and re-told. On the street out in front of the building on top of which he was hiding, Jorgenson could hear Hewitt making a speech.

"No damned road agent can come into a community of peaceful law-abiding citizens and pull a holdup like that!" Hewitt shouted.

Hewitt's statement that Tascosa was a community of peaceful law-abiding citizens was so much hog-wash.

"I'll give half the money he stole as a reward to the man who captures him," Hewitt continued.

Two men passed along the side of the building where Jorgenson was hiding.

"Half the money, hell!" one of them snorted. "If I can get my hands on that money, I'm heading west with *all* of it."

"Me, too!" the second man answered. "Almost four thousand dollars that buzzard got. If I can get my sights on him—"

HEARING this conversation, Jorgenson realized he had roused something hotter than a hornet's nest. Practically the whole population of Tascosa was hunting for him, not because they wanted to help Hewitt get his money back, but because they wanted the money themselves. Why split a reward when they could have the whole take? Jorgenson began to sweat. At least a hundred men were looking for him with what was to them the perfectly sound motive of shooting him for the cigar box of gold pieces he was carrying.

At this point he realized how big a job he had tackled.

He heard horsemen ride out of town, he saw lanterns bobbing around the back doors of the buildings in Tascosa. He wasn't much worried about the men who carried lanterns. They were just poking around in the general excitement but they were'nt really looking for him. You don't carry a lantern when you go looking for a man armed with a shotgun. It was the men who didn't carry lanterns, the men he heard slipping silently between the two buildings, the men who kept in the darkness and moved quietly, who scared him. They were the fellows who were out for business.

Jorgenson didn't like his position on the roof even a little bit but it was the best he could do for the time being.

He heard something clink below him. He craned his neck but could see nothing. Off to the left he saw three men near a building. One of them had a lantern, one of them had a Winchester, and the third had a long pole. He wondered what the pole was for.

He soon found out. They were using the pole to poke under the building. They found a dog. Bang! went the Winchester. The dog yelped, died in a flurry of kicking legs.

The three men moved on to the next structure. Watching them, Jorgenson was damned glad he hadn't crawled *under* a building. The clinking sound came again. It was right under him but he couldn't see the source. He lifted his head and watched closely. He saw a twenty-dollar gold piece slip out from inside his shirt, bounce from the roof, and drop over the edge. The clinking sound came from the gold piece striking the edge of the roof.

His profanity was none the less vicious because it was silent. He reached inside his shirt and hastily adjusted the cigar box so no more of the gold pieces would slide out. From the weight of the box, he decided he hadn't lost enough of the gold coins to make much difference. Anyhow he wasn't greatly concerned about the fate of the money any longer. He was far more concerned about his hide.

TWO men with lanterns came out of the back door of the building where he was hiding. They passed directly under him.

"Hey! What's that?" one said.

"By golly, it's a twenty-dollar gold piece!" he heard the second answer. "Look! There's another one!"

There was a few minutes of silence while the two men searched for more golden coins. They found one more.

"That's all of them, I guess."

"Guess it is. Where do you suppose they came from?"

"Where did they come from? That's easy. The buzzard that held up Hewitt dropped them when he went by here."

Silence again. Jorgenson could almost hear the two men thinking. He was in a cold sweat. They had found the gold coins he had dropped. They were wondering how he had happened to drop them in this particular place. Sooner or later they were going to think of looking up on the roof.

Talking in a low tone of voice, they passed between the two buildings.

Jorgenson tried to hit the ground softly but his boots thudded into the hard dirt and the gold pieces in the cigar box rattled like a half empty keg of nails dropping from a wagon.

"What's that?" he heard a voice exclaim from the street in front of the building.

Jorgenson didn't run. He didn't dare to run. He walked away in the darkness. Skin crawled all over his back as he walked. He felt like he was fifteen feet tall and as broad as a barn door, all of him a target.

By the time the lanterns came around the corner of the saloon he was lying flat in a patch of dry weeds fifty yards from the back end of the building, his heart pounding like a trip-hammer.

"That son-of-a-gun was up on the roof!" he heard a man shout. "Here's his tracks where he jumped off!"

Lanterns came bobbing from all directions. The three men with the pole left off their efforts and joined the crowd. They held a regular pow-wow.

The sound of a stealthy footstep startled Jorgenson. A man with a Sharps rifle walked within ten feet of him, moving toward the crowd at the back end of the saloon. Jorgenson had a wholesome respect for the Sharps rifle in the hands of a buffalo hunter. He lay in the patch of weeds and tried not to breathe. He considered slipping away into the darkness. He might get safely away. On the other hand there might be another silent watcher out there in the night. Without knowing it, he might find himself in the sights of a Sharps and never know anything thereafter. The big guns, designed to stop a buffalo, tore a hell of a hole in a man.

He didn't dare move, he decided. On the other hand, he didn't dare stay still. The crowd was breaking up. Lanterns were moving to the right and the left along the back ends of the buildings. At the far end of the street to the right he could see three lanterns.

"That buzzard can't be far away," he heard someone say. "And he's still got the money!"

The knowledge that the man they sought—and the money—was still somewhere in the vicinity intensified the search. High heeled boots walked all around Jorgenson. A lantern moved toward him. It was coming closer and closer. He watched it, an idea growing in his mind.

THE man with the lantern moved closer. Jorgenson silently laid his shotgun down. He waited. The lantern passed within five feet of him. He rose to his feet, took three quick steps.

His gun barrel smashed across the skull of the man. He grabbed the lantern before it hit the ground.

The man who had been carrying the lantern never knew what hit him. He fell silently. To anyone watching it looked like the lantern had bobbed a little. Maybe the man who was carrying it had stepped into a ditch and then stepped out.

Swiftly, Jorgenson traded hats with the man he had slugged. Nothing changed the appearance of a man so much as a different hat.

Lantern in hand, he walked back toward the main street of Tascosa.

Boldness must carry him to safety. His shotgun he left where it was lying. Any man carrying a shotgun would automatically be an object of suspicion.

A hat, a lantern, and boldness against the ruffians of Tascosa!

"Seen anything?" a man asked him as he stepped out on the main street.

"I ain't seen a thing," Jorgenson answered, shaking his head. "It beats the hell out of me where that buzzard went. Seen anything of Hewitt?"

"He was going back to the Red Dog the last time I saw him."

"Guess I'll find him there," Jorgenson said. He didn't want Hewitt. Crooked Nose was the last man on earth he wanted to see. But if he used a familiar name, he would seem to be a resident of Tascosa. Hewitt was the only man he knew in the fierce little town.

He walked down the street. Again he felt fifteen feet tall and as broad as a barn door, all of him target. The man who had asked him if he had seen anything paid no further attention to him.

The search for him was continuing. Knots of men were talking in the street. The roof of every building was being inspected. The three men with the long pole were again at work poking under each building.

JORGENSON walked down the street. He was looking for a horse that did not seem to be too closely guarded. Outlined against lanterns far down the street, he saw three horses tied to a hitching rack in front of a saloon. He passed the Red Dog saloon. Hewitt was standing in the front door.

"Hey, you!" Crooked Nose called out.

"What do you want?" Jorgenson gruffly answered.

"I want to borry your lantern for a minute."

"Go hunt up your own lantern," Jorgenson answered. "I got use for this one."

He kept on walking. Hewitt swore at him. Glancing back over his shoulder, he saw the gambler turn around and walk back into the saloon.

The feeling of being fifteen feet tall disappeared. If the lantern, the hat, and boldness, had fooled Hewitt, they would fool anybody.

Five minutes later, he had blown out the lantern, left it sitting on the ground, had stolen a horse and was riding out of town on the main street. Only iron-nerved self-control kept him from putting spurs into the pony's flanks. He held the horse to a trot. The men he passed on the street glanced casually at him, then went on with their search for the road agent who had held up Hewitt. They weren't looking for a man riding a pony at a slow trot down the main street of Tascosa.

The twenty-dollar gold pieces, jingling softly in the cigar box inside Jorgenson's shirt, told him that he still hadn't found a job he couldn't do. For a time, it had looked tough. For a time he had thought he was a goner but all he had needed was intelligence and boldness. That was all anyone ever needed.

When he passed the last house of Tascosa, he put spurs to his horse and began to gallop.

He didn't see the two men on horseback beside the road. They were completely hidden in the darkness. He didn't know they were within miles of him.

As soon as they heard his horse, one of them began to swing a rope. He went past them at a gallop. The thrown loop leaped after him.

He never did see the rope but he heard it hiss through the air and knew instantly what it was. He ducked low in the saddle.

The rope was already around his shoulders. He yanked back on the bridle reins, grabbed with the other hand at the rope.

The yank on the reins slowed his pony, saved his life. But he didn't have time to throw off the rope. He was pulled back and out of the saddle. He had the sensation of sliding and falling. He hit the ground with a jar that knocked him unconscious.

"IS THAT the bastard?" he heard a voice say. It was a thin, far-away voice.

"I don't know yet," a second, gruffer, closer voice said.

"Well, hurry up and find out," the thin voice spoke. "There's somebody coming."

"I'm lookin' as fast as I can," the gruff voice answered.

Jorgenson was aware that rough hands were going over his body. He was lying face down in the road. His nose, his mouth, and his eyes were full of sand. He gasped for breath, blew sand out of his nostrils.

"Hello," the gruff voice said. "This jasper is waking up!"

"Then shoot him!" the thin voice said. "But find the money and be quick about it. I hear horses."

"Let 'em come," the gruff voice said.

Jorgenson abruptly stopped trying to regain consciousness. He let himself lie limp. He didn't have enough strength to make a fight.

There was bitterness in his mind. He had been ambushed, just as Cal Jones had been ambushed. He had thought that only a weakling let himself be ambushed.

He was turned over. Hands poked around inside his coat. He didn't dare move. He wasn't able to fight. If he even revealed he was alive, he would be shot.

A match flared. Jorgenson kept his eyes closed.

"There's twenty-dollar gold pieces scattered to hell and gone here in the road!" the gruff voice exclaimed. "Come and help me pick them up."

"I'm coming. But we got to hurry."

Saddle leather creaked. A frantic search began in the sandy road. His fall had smashed the cigar box and had scattered golden coins everywhere. He could hear the two men swearing and scratching in the sand. He could also hear the clip-clop of trotting horses coming nearer and nearer.

"Them ponies is gettin' awful close," the thin voice said.

"What the hell of it? We found him. I'd like to see anybody else cut themselves in on him."

The search continued.

The horses clip-clopped to a stop.

"What's going on here?" one of the riders asked.

"Burn the wind, you two," the gruff voice snarled. "We found him. Nobody else is going to cut in on him. See?"

"Wouldn't think of it," the rider answered. "Come on, Ron. We'll not disturb these two gentlemen."

Jorgenson blew sand out of his mouth.

"Sim!" he croaked. *"Sim!"*

THE voice of the rider was the sweetest voice he had ever heard. It was the voice of Sim Sebastion speaking to Ron Carter. His partners! For the first time in his life he fully realized the meaning of the word *partner*.

There was a split second of silence after he spoke.

Jorgenson vaguely saw his two captors stand up. They were dim and indistinct figures reaching for their guns. Sim Sebastion shot first. Ron Carter shot later.

For the space of thirty seconds Jorgenson did not know whether he was going to be killed by a flying bullet or crushed by a plunging horse. He crawled toward the edge of the road. Bullets were thudding all around him. Sebastion's and Carter's horses, frightened by the sudden thunder of guns, were trying to buck and to run at the same time. Carter was thrown. He fell heavily but dragged himself to his knees and was looking for a target when the battle ended.

It ended with one dead bandit sprawled in the road. The second bandit darted into the brush that lined the road. For minutes Jorgenson could hear him running.

Then Carter and Sebastion were kneeling beside him and were gently helping him to a sitting position.

"Where," he whispered, "where did you two fellows come from?"

"We talked it over and decided you might need help whether you knew it or not," Sebastion said.

"I sure needed it," Jorgenson answered.

For him, this was the biggest admission he could possibly make.

"We stayed at the ranch as long as we could stand it," Carter said. "Then we decided to come after you. After all, we're your partners."

There was solid satisfaction in that word *partner*. Jorgenson let the satisfaction flow through him. Somehow it soothed his jolted, sore, and aching body. *Partners*. Men who help each other, men who fight for each other, if the need arises, men who share trouble and danger together. That was what the word meant. It was a grand word, one of the grandest words he had ever heard.

THE END

BRONCHO-BUSTING WAS A BUSINESS

By

JEFFRY STEVENS

THE HOOFS that thundered over the western plains and through the treacherous mountain passes, are echoing still. In so many important ways, the horse was responsible for the building of our great American West. Without the horse, the cattle industry would never have been founded, and the West would not have been settled for centuries to come. The wild cattle, which constituted one of the most lucrative sources of wealth contained in the nation, were four-legged creatures who could out-run almost every pursuer, all but the fleet-footed horse. With the horse, man mastered the roving herds and organized a thriving industry.

It was the Spanish conquerors who brought the horse to this continent. Cattle and horses were transported and set ashore here sometime in the early and glorious day at the dawn of American history. Toward the close of the 16th century, the Spanish government turned an unknown number of horses loose upon the southwestern plains with the purpose of stocking this country with the animal. The Indians had not known the horse previously and were accustomed to using dogs as beasts of burden and doing their hunting on foot. The coming of the horse revolutionized their entire tribal life.

The pony of the range as first seen by the American cowboy was a small, hard, wiry creature, wild and strong. He stood less than fourteen hands high and weighed not more than six hundred pounds, but he had an amazing amount of endurance. On the northern range the cow horse was called a "cayuse" and on the southern range simply a cow horse when tamed, but a "broncho" when still wild. "Broncho" is the Spanish word for "wild."

Horse ranching began as an organized enterprise in the pre-Civil War days on the vast unbroken plains of upper Texas. One of the very first horse ranches was established by Jim Patton who hailed originally from the green hills of Pennsylvania. Fencing off a few hundred acres of Texas land for his own use, Patton began slowly to accumulate stock and to breed horses. At the time of the Civil War he had a few hundred head of horses. Patton's pride and joy was a very fine black stallion whom he treated with special favor. The animal was fed at the house and followed his master about like a dog.

In the unsettled days which preceded the Civil War, a band of raiders stormed in upon Patton's ranch and loudly demanded horses for the Confederate Army. They were offered their choice of the herd, but they demanded Jim's favorite stallion and he refused. Rather than allow the ruffian's to make off with the animal, Patton quietly ordered his servant to lead it to the spring back in the timber, intending to kill it himself. The conversation must have been overheard for when Patton stepped into the path to follow the animal, he was shot in the back. The cowardly raiders made off with the black stallion, leaving all the other horses behind. This incident ended one of the very first attempts at horse ranching east of the Rockies, for Patton had no family to carry on where he had left off. Other men came to carry on in his place.

Life in those early days was very wild and free. The land was still unfenced, and horses ranged unrestricted in as great numbers as cattle. Horse habits are slightly different than cattle; they band up more closely, and each stallion would drive off a band of forty to seventy-five mares. A band would feed apart and would localize itself, becoming identified with a certain range. Wild horses show a homing instinct of a sort; they never liked to leave their native range. If stolen they would always manage to return, sometimes over a distance of hundreds of miles.

When spring came to the West, the men of the horse ranches joined in the round-up. Each ranch would send its group of men and pack horses. The cowboys would have only the finest and swiftest mounts for they had to head off bands of fleeing horses. Sometimes it was necessary for them to chase eight or ten miles before the wild band would "round-up" and be headed in the direction of the corral. The horse round-up was much more difficult a task than one involving cattle. Some bands of horses could keep ahead and out of reach of the galloping cowboys for several days of hard riding before finally being surrounded and brought under control. The swiftest of the wild lot was always the little colt, sometimes not more than a week or two old. He was always in the lead, the colt usually running ahead of its mother.

In the corral, the brands would identify the horses belonging to each ranch; the new colts would go with their mothers. Once ownership was established, the horses would be driven to their home ranches, and then the real work would commence. A high-walled circular corral was the "round-pen" or branding area where the colts were roped and marked. The horses that were ready to be "busted" or saddle-broken were separated from the rest, and then the most exciting phase of ranch-life was launched.

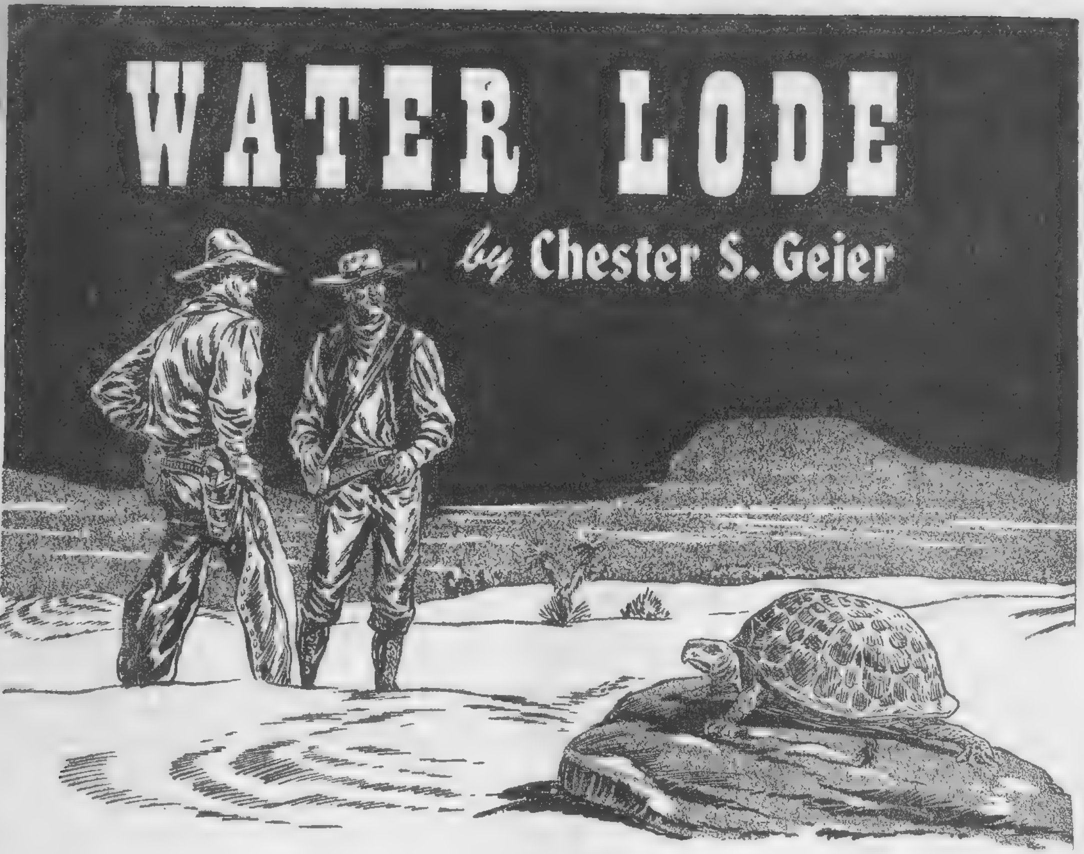
The hectic business of taming wild horses went on for nearly half the year, calling to the fore the most daring and expert riders the West contained. The hazardous trade of horse-breaking was handled under contract by the "broncho-busting" cowboys—at so much a head for the ranches having unbroken stock on hand. The job called for nerves and muscles made of steel, and a very rare brand of courage. The most successful "broncho-buster" lasted but a few years in the dangerous business. Injuries were expected, and falls were a matter of course. A broken leg or arm was not considered unusual, and the rider accepted his disability philosophically knowing that the damage could have been much worse. Sometimes the "broncho-buster's" lungs were torn loose by the violent jolting, and many busters would spit blood after being in the business a few months.

A horse was considered broken after he had been forcibly ridden two or three times. Contrary to the urban-dweller's belief, a cow-horse was never really cured entirely of the habit of bucking. Some of the most trusted horses on a ranch always bucked when first mounted after a long rest, and some needed preliminary training every time they were mounted. The battle between wild horse and broncho-buster was the battle of man against brute, full of violence, fury, and sometimes blood. Yet on the Western range the men who risked their lives in this taming process sought no glory. They knew they were performing a needed task, and considered their job an ordinary one. Pay ran from twenty to forty dollars a month, and when handled on a contract basis, about five dollars per head.

To the man of the range, the horse was his most prized possession. That noble animal helped him bridge the vast distances which separated the settlements, took him into the unexplored regions where mineral wealth could be unearthed, and helped found the cattle industry which has made our West what it is today.

WATER LODE

by Chester S. Geier



The two men stood calmly watching . . .

AS USUAL, Pete Tatum was having an argument. Grimly, determinedly, and with all the energy he could muster under the withering glare of the desert sun.

The fact that he was arguing with himself in no way lessened the intensity of the quarrel.

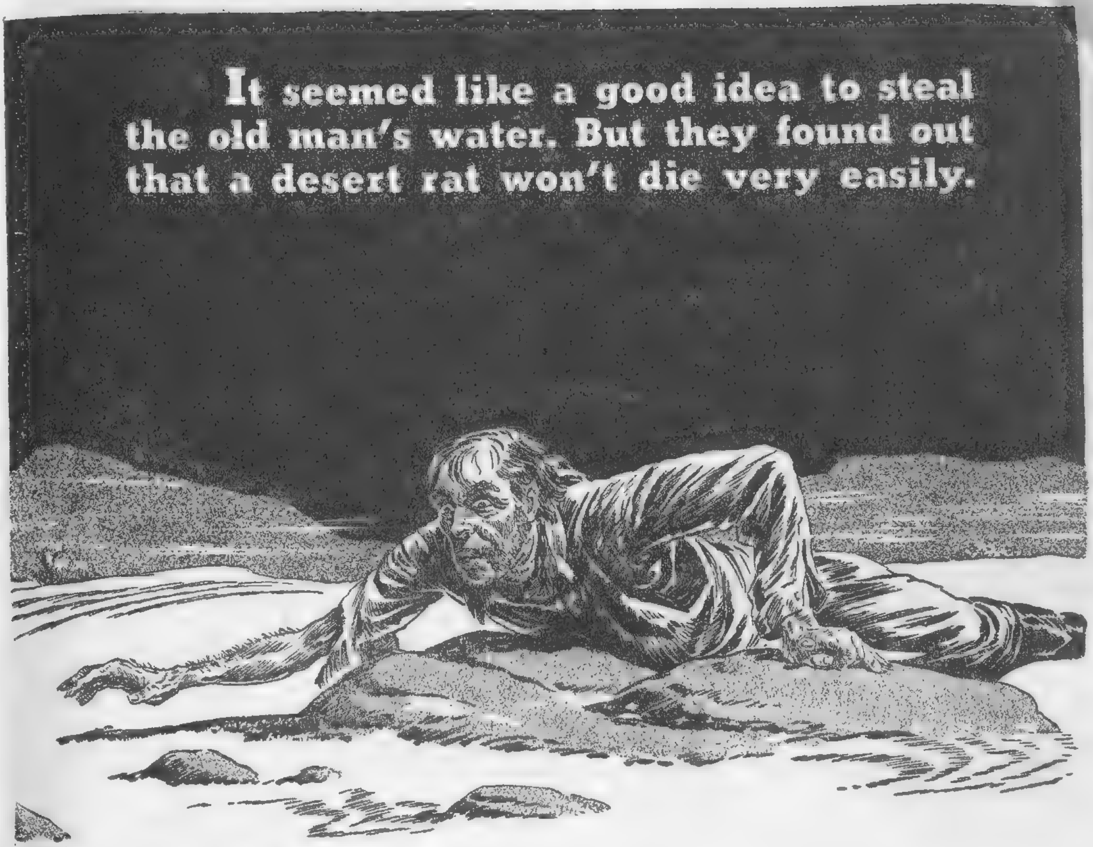
"Dang you! I *tol'* you there was nothin' in that valley back in the hills, but you wanted to nosey around, an' now we gotta hurry, 'cause if'n we don't there ain't goin' to be enough grub an' water to reach Red Gulch!"

The expression of such of Pete Tatum's wrinkled, leathery features as were visible above his scraggly gray beard turned from accusing to defiant.

"It was worth a look," he growled at his *alter ego.* "There might've been gold in the valley. An' 'sides, you ought to be glad we got enough grub an' water to reach Red Gulch—even if'n we *do* have to hurry some!"

Tatum shook his untidy gray head and looked fiercely obstinate. He wasn't going to give in—not even to himself. He puckered his almost lipless gash of a mouth, shot a stream of tobacco juice at a cluster of cactus, and pitched back into the verbal fray.

With the melancholy patience of his kind, Jupiter the pack burro plodded at Tatum's side. Occasionally Jupiter's long ears twitched, as if to show a mild interest in the quarrel. Quite probably it was just a dutiful gesture, for it was certain that Jupiter had long since



It seemed like a good idea to steal the old man's water. But they found out that a desert rat won't die very easily.

. . . while Tatum strained his body desperately forward

grown used to the endless wrangling that attended Tatum's prospecting trips into the desert.

It was late afternoon. The sun, which had as yet lost little of its fiery intensity, was lowering itself down the parched sky toward its bedroll of distant mountains. The desert rolled away in every direction, an undulating sea of hot, dry, yellow-white sand, strewn with occasional outcroppings of bleached gray rock and dotted with numerous varieties of cactus. The taller growths, with their spiny, upflung limbs, looked curiously like grotesque green scarecrows. A thick, burned-out stillness lay over everything, as though the scene were encased in a great block of clear glass.

Tatum trudged over the sand, squabbling indefatigably. Words jumped out of him at each step of his worn leather boots. A listener might have detected the changes in his creaking, nasal voice as the strange two-in-one debate shifted sides.

THE present bone of contention was argued bare without either opponent conceding defeat. It was tossed aside, and another promptly started on.

"Anyhow, you're washed up — an' you know it! You ain't made a strike in years, an' your stake at the bank is gone. You'll have to get a job at one of the mines in Red Gulch, if'n you want to keep on eatin'."

" 'Tain't so! I know the right folks,

see? They'll gimme a grubstake for another trip. An' this time I'll find somethin'. Just you wait."

"Give you a grubstake? Why, you'll be danged lucky if'n they don't fetch the sheriff! Just a worthless old man, that's what you are! A vagrant, even. No visible means of support."

"Now you lookee here, Pete Tatum—!"

It went on. And on.

Tatum reached a group of huge boulders. He paused in their shade a moment, glancing at the sun. The spot would have been ideal in which to pitch camp for the day. But it would be quite a while yet before night closed down. It would be wisest to continue on as far as he could. His supply of food and water wouldn't hold out to Red Gulch unless he hurried.

Tatum licked his caked lips at the thought of water. He unfastened the remaining canteen from Jupiter's neck load and drank sparingly. He didn't overlook Jupiter. The hardy little burro got along well enough on such moisture and nourishment as were to be found in tough, rubbery cactus leaves, but a little water now and then was always welcome. Obtaining a small pan from a canvas pack, Tatum poured into it a small but refreshing amount of the precious liquid. Jupiter drank eagerly, with grateful snuffles.

Then, with a hitch at his sagging belt and a slap on Jupiter's hairy rump, Tatum started out again. He had left the boulders a good distance behind, when the sound of a gunshot broke the desert silence.

Tatum stopped abruptly, turning to squint in the direction from which the report had come. In another moment he glimpsed two men on horseback atop a sandy ridge less than a quarter of a mile away. As he watched, they began hurrying toward him.

The shot wasn't repeated. It had evidently been made solely to catch his attention.

Tatum realized after several minutes that something was wrong with the mounts of the two riders. They were staggering and swaying drunkenly as they approached over the sand. All tired out, Tatum decided. Or half dead from thirst. He thought in sudden apprehension of his water supply—insufficient for his own frugal needs.

ONE of the two horses suddenly stumbled and fell, throwing its rider to the sand. It didn't get up again, but lay where it had fallen, not moving. The remaining rider didn't check his progress or in any other way offer aid. Without so much as a glance at his thrown companion, he continued on toward Tatum. The man who had been thrown struggled to his feet and followed at a shambling run, cursing in rage and chagrin.

"I don't like this," Tatum muttered to himself. "Nope, I don't like it atall. These gents don't 'pear worth sharin' water with—'specially when you ain't got a lot of it."

He shrugged as his other half considered the matter and formed a different opinion.

"These gents are outta their heads from thirst, that's all. Can't 'zactly blame 'em for actin' that way. 'Sides, Pete Tatum, don't you try dodgin' the fact that you should always share water with folks in the desert who ain't got any."

In another few minutes the mounted man reached Tatum, jumping to the sand even before his now completely exhausted horse had come to a full stop.

"Water!" he gasped. "Gotta have water!"

Tatum looked the man over carefully. The other was just over average height, lean almost to skinniness, but with a suggestion of quick, wiry strength. His whisker-stubbled face was just a bit too narrow, his eyes set just a bit too closely on either side of his long, sharp nose. His clothing, travel-stained and dusty, hardly seemed the clothing of a man who lives and makes his living near the desert. Twin sixguns hung at each hip, thonged down and slanted back in the fashion of one accustomed to using them not only often but quickly.

Tatum digested what he saw—and found he had a bitter taste in his mouth. He said slowly:

"I ain't got enough water to last the three of us very long, stranger, so you'll have to go mighty easy on it."

The other nodded slightly, slate-gray eyes lidded. He rubbed the back of a hand across his cracked lips.

"I heard you, old timer. Now suppose you rustle the water."

Filled with vague misgivings, Tatum unfastened the canteen, uncorked it, and turned with the intention of handing it to the other. He was given no chance to complete the gesture, for the container was abruptly snatched from his hand. In another instant the stranger had its mouth buried between his lips and was gulping greedily at its contents.

Tatum watched jealously, counting the gulps. Anxiety mounted inside him as the other showed no indication of letting up. Unable to control himself any longer, Tatum reached out and pulled the canteen away.

There was a whirl of movement. Blinking dazedly, Tatum found himself staring into the barrels of the stranger's twin sixguns. The other was slightly crouched, slate-gray eyes wide open now, hard and cold as chilled steel.

Tatum swallowed nervously. "Sorry I had to do that, stranger, but like I tol' you, this is all the water I got. We have to be mighty careful with it."

THE frigid, deadly glare faded from the other's eyes. He nodded distantly and holstered his guns.

"Guess you're right, old timer—but I don't take to bein' treated tough-like, savvy? We'll get along fine, if you'll just remember that." The thin, sharp-nosed man turned to gaze toward his approaching comrade. The other had slowed to a walk, and now was staggering noticeably as he came forward.

"Damn you, Slade," the latecomer snapped, between panting breaths. "Whyn't you gimme a hand back there?"

The sharp-nosed man lifted his spare shoulders and let them drop. "Use your head, Bull. My horse couldn't have carried the two of us."

Bull wasn't much taller than Slade, but his big-boned, heavy body made him seem huge by comparison. He had fleshy, blunt features burned red by the sun, and deep-set, small blue eyes. The lower part of his face was bristly with the beginnings of a straw-colored beard. Like Slade, he wore sixguns holstered at his broad hips, but his deliberate, plodding movements suggested that he had little if any of Slade's speed at draw. Only a brief study of Bull's thick, dull countenance was necessary to show that Slade was the leader of the two.

Bull turned his scowling gaze at Tatum, running the tip of his tongue over his lips. He grunted impatiently:

"Ain't you got no manners? Shake the lead outta your pants and hand that water bottle over."

With trembling fingers, Tatum uncorked the canteen again, wincing as it was jerked a second time from his grasp. Bull was raising it to his mouth, when Slade spoke.

"Take it easy on the water, Bull. It's all this old timer has. It'll have to last us until we reach a place where there's more."

Bull nodded sullenly, but once he started pouring the water down his throat, it took another order from Slade, sharp-edged this time, to make him stop. Bull started to hand the canteen back to Tatum, but Slade reached for it.

"I'll take care of this from now on."

Tatum was about to indignantly object, but a glance at Slade's determined, hard face changed his mind. At the other's gesture, he handed over the cork.

Slade turned to Bull and began speaking curtly. "We'll have to shoot the horses. There's ain't enough water for them, and they're too far gone anyhow. You go back and take care of yours, Bull. And bring back your rifle and bedroll. You'll be needing them."

"Orders!" Bull muttered. "Allus orders." But he turned and began to trudge toward his fallen mount.

SLADE turned to his own mount, standing nearby, head low in utter exhaustion. He began removing the articles fastened to its back, a pair of bulging saddlebags, a rifle, a bedroll, and finally the saddle. Then he led the horse a short distance away. Moving back several feet, he pulled out one of his guns. Two quick reports thundered into the stillness. The horse thudded heavily to the sand.

Slade walked back to Tatum, stuffing fresh shells into his gun. His narrow features were expressionless. He asked:

"Where you headin' for, old timer?"

"Red Gulch," Tatum admitted grudgingly.

"A town, is it?"

Tatum nodded. "Minin' town."

"Any water between here and Red Gulch?"

"Mebbe."

"What do you mean?"

Tatum turned his head and spat a stream of tobacco juice to hide the sudden, sly expression that had crossed his face. "Mebbe — if'n we run across somebody who has some water to spare."

"How far's Red Gulch?"

Tatum had his slyness well under control now. He gestured vaguely toward the south.

"Plenty far, stranger. 'Bout three days steady walkin'."

Slade produced a tobacco sack and papers, and began to roll a cigarette. He said slowly:

"I like to know just where I'm goin', and just how to get there. Mind explainin' how you reach Red Gulch?"

Tatum pushed back his flop-brimmed hat, scratched his matted gray thatch, and looked uncertain. "Shucks, stranger, in the desert you either know where you're goin' or you don't. Gotta know the country. Just you follow me, an' you'll get there."

Slade said nothing further. He sat down on the saddle he had removed from his horse and smoked his cigarette, looking thoughtful.

Tatum glanced up at the sky. Two buzzards were circling high in the air. They were waiting, he knew. Waiting for the men to leave. Then they would come down and gorge themselves on dead horseflesh.

Tatum considered the buzzards somberly. He wasn't overlooking the possibility that he might become buzzard fodder himself. The chances that the three of them would reach Red Gulch on the present supply of water were mighty slim. Tatum had deliberately held back from Slade the information as to how to find the town. Slade and

Bull were tough hombres. He couldn't take the risk, once they knew how to find Red Gulch alone, that they would kill him so there would be one less with whom to share the water.

Tatum jumped startledly as a shot broke the silence. That would be Bull, finishing off his horse. Several minutes later, the big man appeared, trudging toward them over the sand, the rifle and bedroll slung under one arm.

Slade looked at Jupiter, then at Tatum. "How long will your burro hold out?"

"He'll hold out, all right," Tatum insisted in sudden anxiety. "Ol' Jupe is a tough critter."

"Then you'd better get rid of some of your stuff, so's Bull an' me can load our things on it," Slade said.

RELUCTANTLY, Tatum removed his prospecting equipment. The remaining articles were necessary and couldn't be abandoned. Slade and Bull piled their belongings atop Jupiter—with the exception of Slade's saddlebags—and after Tatum had once more secured the lashings, they started off.

At a gulley, partly enclosed at one end by upright slabs of basalt, Slade finally called a stop. The sun was well on its way toward setting.

"Good place to pitch camp," Slade explained tersely. "It'll be gettin' dark soon."

On orders from Slade, Bull grumblingly helped Tatum gather a load of brushwood for a fire. Slade sat and watched, the saddlebags close at his side. Realization came to Tatum that Slade was jealously careful of those saddlebags. He began to wonder what could possibly be inside them that required such protection.

When enough fuel had been gathered, Tatum set about cooking a meal of flapjacks and bacon. He used his own supplies. Slade and Bull seemed to have exhausted theirs—if they had brought any along on their trip across the desert at all. Tatum decided they hadn't. He already was certain that they were completely unfamiliar with desert country. What had prompted them to cross it in the first place was a mystery.

As Tatum performed the familiar task of cooking, he forgot momentarily that he was no longer alone. He struck up an argument with himself, while he fried the bacon and mixed the flapjack batter.

Slade and Bull watched him in puzzled surprise for some seconds. Then they glanced at each other significantly.

"Desert crazy," Slade breathed.

Presently Tatum recollected himself sufficiently to bring up the question of coffee. Slade vetoed the idea on the basis that too much water would be consumed in boiling.

They settled down to eat, helping themselves directly from the cook pans. Slade and Bull devoured the food voraciously. Each time Tatum reached for a flapjack or a strip of bacon, it was to find the hands of Slade and Bull already there before him. The food was gone even before he was able to blunt the edge of his appetite.

Slade uncorked the water canteen and took several slow gulps. Then he handed it to Bull, who despite Slade's watchful gaze, managed to swallow more than Slade had done. Bull gave the canteen back to Slade. The other corked it and placed it carefully behind his back.

Tatum stared. "Ain't . . . ain't you gonna gimme none?"

Slade glanced at Tatum from beneath lidded eyes. "You'll get water in the morning, old timer. We gotta go easy on it, you know."

"B-but that's my water, d-dang it!"

Tatum sputtered in outrage.

"Nothin' wrong with me takin' care of it for you, is there?" Slade placed a lean hand on the walnut butt of a sixgun.

Tatum thought it over. "Guess not." He fell silent, staring into the fire. The desert night pressed in all around, deep and still.

SLADE and Bull unslung their bedrolls and stretched out near the basalt slabs. After a moment Tatum followed suit, aware of Slade's watchful gaze. Settling himself along the gulley wall some distance from the others, he pulled his shapeless hat down over his eyes and to all outward appearances promptly fell asleep. He even snored after a few minutes. But he had never been more widely awake at any time in his life.

Evidently assured that Tatum was deep in slumber, Slade and Bull began speaking in low tones.

"The nearest town is Red Gulch, according to what the old cuss told me," Slade said. "It's a minin' town. No water on the way, 'ceptin' what we got."

"How far's it?" Bull asked.

" 'Bout three days away. The old cuss don't know 'zactly how far or where it is, but he knows how to get there."

Bull emitted a throaty curse. "That means we gotta share the water with him until—"

"Until we're near enough to find it alone," Slade finished. "We can't take any chances he might do some talkin'."

"Think we'll be able to reach Red Gulch?" Bull inquired, after a short silence.

"If we're mighty careful with the water. We'll be plenty thirsty when we get there—but we'll be alive."

"I don't like it!" Bull growled. "We should've stayed up north an' not tried crossin' the desert in the first place."

"What else could we do?" Slade demanded. "That posse was gettin' too close for comfort. It was the only way to throw them off."

"Maybe—but I shouldn't've let you talk me into pullin' that bank job. Robbery ain't so bad—but killin' a sheriff and two deputies is too much."

"It was me or them," Slade pointed out calmly. "What you cryin' about, Bull? Once we get over the border into Mexico, we'll live like kings with the bank money." Slade patted the saddlebags at his side. "Twenty-five thousand dollars, Bull—think of it!"

With a terrific effort, Tatum forced himself to keep snoring. Bank robbers! Twenty-five thousand in loot! The knowledge burned in his mind like a flame.

He lay motionless, pretending to sleep. Slade and Bull talked a while longer. Then there was the rustling of blankets as the two settled themselves for slumber. Silence fell.

Tatum's agitated thoughts crystallized into a plan. Slade and Bull were worn out. Once they slept, nothing less than an earthquake would be able to waken them. If Tatum could stealthily obtain the water canteen, he could reach Red Gulch and tell the sheriff there about the two. There was certain to be a reward for the bank money, and this would furnish him with a new stake for further prospecting trips. As for Slade and Bull, they wouldn't have enough strength left to put up a fight when the sheriff and his men came after them.

CLUTCHING the plan eagerly in the palm of his mind, Tatum waited. The fire burned down to a few sullenly glowing embers. The breezes of night blew their cold breath over the desert. Slade and Bull lay quietly, breathing with the steady regularity of sleep.

Finally, assured that the two outlaws slept soundly enough for the success of his plan, Tatum pulled his blankets aside and crept toward Slade. He discovered that Slade lay almost touching one of the basalt slabs, with Bull on the other side of him. It was an awkward position for Tatum's intentions. To reach the water canteen between Slade and the slab, he would have to reach precariously over both men. There wasn't enough space between them for him to approach Slade alone.

Bracing one foot against a rock imbedded in the sand and stepping carefully over Bull with the other, Tatum reached for the water canteen behind Slade. With infinite care, he began working it loose from where the outlaw's back pressed it against the slab.

The rock gave under the pressure of his weight, rolled aside. His boot slid through the loose sand.

Tatum crashed down atop Slade and Bull.

The two awoke with mingled exclamations of alarmed surprise. As Tatum began frantically to wriggle free, the outlaws recovered from their shock and in another moment pinned Tatum helplessly between them.

"You, eh?" Slade grunted. He released Tatum and stood up. At a gesture to Bull, Tatum was hauled roughly to his feet.

Slade studied Tatum grimly. "All right, old timer, just what were you up to?"

"I . . . I just wanted a drink of water," Tatum stammered. "Woke up an' was powerful thirsty."

"Sure that's all you wanted?" Slade demanded. "Sure you didn't have any ideas of taking the water and leaving me an' Bull?"

"Course not!" Tatum insisted. "I wouldn't do a thing like that. Just wanted a drink of water, like I tol' you."

"Even if it's true, old timer, I don't think I better take any more chances with you." With no warning change of expression in his narrow face, Slade abruptly swung a fist. The blow caught Tatum on the side of the jaw, and he plunged into unconsciousness as though a trapdoor had gaped suddenly beneath him.

Slade obtained the loose lashings from Jupiter's pack load, and securely bound Tatum's arms and legs. Then he and Bull lay down once more and wrapped themselves in their blankets.

"The old coot must've been awake all the time," Slade said after some seconds. "Waited until we were sleepin' before he tried that trick of his."

Bull's response was grim-toned. "That means he heard what we was talkin' about a while back. Slade . . . He knows about the money—an' the killin's."

Slade nodded bleakly. "We'll remember that when the time comes. Right now, let's try to get some sleep."

SLADE was up shortly before dawn. He shook Bull awake, and then turned his attention to Tatum. He was untying Tatum's bonds when the old prospector muttered and opened his eyes.

"Shake a leg!" Slade ordered. "It's time for breakfast. We got to get movin' before the sun gets hot."

Tatum climbed slowly to his feet, leaden with despair. He had failed. The realization tore at him.

Dejectedly, Tatum set about making breakfast. When the meal was over, Slade and Bull drank from the canteen. Tatum was pointedly ignored. He gazed bitterly at Slade.

"No water for me, huh?"

"Not after that dodge you tried to

pull last night," Slade snapped. "Now shut up an' get movin'."

Jupiter's load was fastened, and shortly they set out, Tatum and the burro in front, and Slade and Bull bringing up the rear. The sun began climbing a ladder in the sky, wiping the night shadows one by one from the desert floor. Slowly and perceptibly, the air grew warmer.

Conflicting thoughts milled through Tatum's mind as he plodded over the sand. Uppermost was the idea of circling aimlessly until the water was gone and Slade and Bull died of thirst. But that would mean sacrificing himself as well. Tatum didn't intend to cash in his chips any sooner than was absolutely necessary.

He couldn't however, side-step the knowledge that Slade and Bull would kill him or leave him behind to die of thirst once they were able to find Red Gulch alone. He had to prevent that. Somehow he had to find a way to trick the two.

Tatum's steps led him inexorably in the direction of the town—nearer to his own death—while he pondered the problem facing him. As the miles unwound slowly underfoot, he came no closer to a solution. It seemed that only a miracle could save him.

The sun reached its zenith, blazing down mercilessly. The progress of the group slowed to a listless crawling pace, and at last Slade called a halt. He and Bull drank once more from the canteen.

Tatum watched wistfully. He already felt the growing ravages of thirst.

Slade glanced speculatively at Tatum and shook the canteen. Its answering gurgles showed it to be about half filled.

"You ain't gonna give him a drink, are you?" Bull demanded. "We ain't got enough for ourselves."

"The old timer will have to have some water if he's goin' to take us to Red Gulch," Slade pointed out. "Can't let him cash in on us." He glanced at Tatum again. "We're goin' in the right direction, ain't we? Sure you ain't tryin' to lose me an' Bull?"

Tatum shook his head emphatically. "I don't aim to cut my own throat at the same time, stranger."

"Keep goin' in the right direction, an' you'll get water," Slade promised. "Try to lose me an' Bull, an' you'll be the first to cash in, savvy?" At Tatum's nod of understanding, Slade handed him the canteen. "Here—an' take it easy."

The water was like a life-giving elixir to Tatum. He felt renewed strength flow into him. Handing the canteen back to Slade, a sudden thought struck him. He asked:

"What about Jupiter?"

"He'll have to get along on his own. Men is more important than burros, old timer."

They rested for a while. After another meal of flapjacks and bacon, the trio started out again. Heat devils danced over the sand as the sunlight reached its afternoon intensity. The steps of the men once more grew laborious and plodding.

STEP after dragging step. Minutes that seemed like hours; hours that seemed like days. The sun, beating down at them with bright, hot hands. The desert, rolling away and away in dry, dreary vistas of sand, rock, and cactus.

Evening came at last, and with it food and rest. Tatum fell almost immediately into exhausted slumber. He had been forced by Slade and Bull into a pace far beyond the ability of his aging muscles.

In the afternoon of the second day, Slade called a halt in the shadows of a rocky ravine. By now Tatum was too weak to do any cooking. He sat sprawled against a rock, eyes covered with a dull film, thin chest rising and falling quickly with a shallow, irregular breathing. His lips were as dry, cracked, and brittle as old parchment. The pace set by the two outlaws had taken its final toll. Tatum had been given water from time to time—but not as much as his exertions required.

Slade ill-naturedly took over the task of cooking. Barely enough flour and bacon were left for the meal. Tatum was ignored when Slade and Bull finally gathered about the fire to eat. He was ignored again when the canteen was passed around.

Slade shook the canteen before he corked it, listening with anxious intentness. His slate-gray eyes grew bleak.

The rest did Tatum good. The dullness gradually faded from his eyes, and his breathing became more regular. His mind cleared. He looked around him slowly, lingeringly, knowing it was the end.

A movement caught his notice as a small object emerged from behind a rock some twenty feet away. It was a desert tortoise. Blinking its lidded eyes, it remained there for a moment, gazing curiously at the three men.

Tatum pointed incredulously, his body shaking in sudden excitement. "Water!" he gasped. "Water!"

Slade and Bull stared from the tortoise to Tatum. Their glances met. Slade tapped a forefinger meaningly against his temple.

With a sudden burst of strength, Tatum climbed to his feet. Obtaining a blanket with frantic haste from Jupiter's pack load, he hobbled toward the rock. The tortoise had ducked back out of sight at Tatum's cry, and now was trying to scuttle away to safety. But with frenzied speed, Tatum pounced upon it, whipping the creature into the folds of the blanket.

He was gathering the ends of the blanket together, when his gaze fell upon another tortoise several yards away, frozen into inactivity by the sheer wonder of this unusual break in the monotony of its placid desert existence. After a short chase, Tatum caught this one also, and it went into the blanket with the other.

The effort proved too much for Tatum. He slumped down on the sand, heart pounding dangerously, the breath coming raggedly through his lips.

"Crazy!" Bull muttered in disgust. "Plumb crazy!"

Slade got up and went over to Tatum. "What was the idea, old timer?"

Tatum looked up at Slade, grinning foolishly. "Water," he mumbled. "A regular lode." Then: "You're crazy, Pete Tatum! What you doin', talkin' like a demented idjit?"

An argument developed that lasted for some seconds. Slade listened, shaking his head. At last, with a grimace of impatience, he turned away. He grunted:

"Time to start movin'."

THEY left the relative shelter of the ravine and struck out once more into the furnace-like glaring expanse of the desert. Tatum clutched at his blanket, muttering and cackling to himself as he staggered uncertainly along. Jupiter plodded slowly at his side, head low, ears drooping like wilted leaves.

Less than an hour later, Tatum fell limply to the sand. Bull jerked him to his feet, but had to hold him up to keep him from falling again.

Tatum shook his head. "Can't make it," he husked. "I'm done for."

Motioning for Bull to lower the old prospector to the sand, Slade uncorked the water canteen. "Look, old timer, you'd like a drink, wouldn't you?"

Tatum's eyes fixed upon the canteen as though it were an object of the most intense fascination. He tried to speak, but could only nod.

"Before I give you a drink," Slade said, "I want you to tell me where Red Gulch is, an' how far from here."

Tatum got out words with an effort. "Straight ahead . . . like we was goin'. Can't . . . can't miss it. You'll make it, late tomorrow . . . if you pushalong steady."

Slade nodded and stood up. He corked the canteen. "That's all I want to know." He gestured to Bull. "All right, let's get movin'."

Bull said, "You gonna leave the old coot here?"

Slade nodded curtly. "We'll find the town alone, now."

Bull dropped a big hand to the butt of a sixgun. "We oughtta finish him off. Can't take no chances."

"He's already finished," Slade pointed out. "Red Gulch is a day off. Without water, he'll never make it."

Bull finally shrugged. Slade turned to where Jupiter squatted in the sand, and prodded the burro with a boot. Jupiter tried to rise, but fell back weakly. The animal seemed as far gone as Tatum.

Slade gave up. He and Bull piled their belongings into their blankets, and slung these sack fashion over their backs. Without so much as a backward glance at Tatum, they started out. The old prospector dwindled into the distance that Slade and Bull put behind them. He lay very quietly under the fiery sun.

The two outlaws reached Red Gulch in the evening of the third day. The last of the water had given out that morning, and they were barely able to stagger into the little mining town.

They slaked their thirst at a pump over a horse trough. Later they ate and obtained a room at Red Gulch's only hotel. They slept until late the following morning.

Slade and Bull wasted little time thereafter. Mexico was only a short distance away now, and Slade was in a hurry to get over the border. They began their preparations for leaving, purchasing horses, new clothes, and the equipment and supplies they would need.

IN THE afternoon they were finished. Checking out of the hotel, they started for the stable where they had left the horses. They were resplendent in their new finery, well fed, and smoking cigars. Slade carried the bulging saddlebags. He spoke eagerly to Bull of the things they would do when they reached Mexico.

Halfway to the stable, a knot of men moved from one side of the street and into their path. The leader of the group was a tall man with flaming red hair. He had a sheriff's badge pinned to one pocket of his faded flannel shirt. At his side was an all-too-familiar figure.

Slade and Bull stared in utter disbelief.

It was Pete Tatum.

Tatum pointed. "That's them, sheriff!"

With a grave nod, the tall man strode forward, thumbs hooked casually in his gunbelt. "I'd like a look at them saddlebags, boys. Pete Tatum, here tells me you robbed a bank somewhere up north. If it ain't true—"

Snarling, Slade went for his guns. An instant later, panic giving him a swiftness that he ordinarily lacked, Bull went for his also.

The tall man whirled to one side, moving very fast, yet with a deliberate, machine-like precision. His guns cleared leather as he moved, and their thunder blended with that from the guns of Slade and Bull in a roar like a string of firecrackers going off.

Silence came abruptly, a silence underscored by powder smoke and italicized by the smell of cordite. The tall man stood swaying a little. Blood was beginning to well from a crease in his shoulder. A bullet had knocked his hat off, and a hole showed in his flannel shirt at the waist where another had passed harmlessly through the slack cloth.

Bull lay sprawled on his side in the dust of the street, staring up at the sky with eyes that no longer saw. A grimace of surprise and pain was frozen on his heavy face. Just over the bridge of his blunt, thick nose was something that hadn't been there before—something that looked oddly like a black button sewed on with crimson threads.

Slade was on his knees, clutching intently at his chest, as though he sought to keep something incalculably precious imprisoned there. But his fingers couldn't hold back the flood of life that leaked inexorably away from the two bullet holes near his heart. His face was white, shocked, incredulous. In another moment he toppled over into the dust. He lay there, and then his eyes, moving slowly over the semi-circle of faces before him, found Tatum.

"You!" he whispered. "You did this! But . . . but how? You should have died of thirst without water, back there."

Tatum shook his slovenly gray head. His bewhiskered features were solemn.

"I had water, all right—enough for Jupiter an' me, both. Found a regular water lode."

SLADE closed his eyes a moment, clutching a little tighter at his chest. Then he looked at Tatum again.

"I . . . I don't get it. What's this water lode? Where'd you find it?"

"Remember the two desert tortoises I caught?" Tatum asked rhetorically. "Well, they was my water lode. If you knew the desert 'stead of bein' a stranger from up north, you'd of known that desert tortoises got a bladder under their shells that hold nearly a pint of good, clear water. With the two I caught, Jupiter an' me had plenty of water to reach Red Gulch on. I had desert tortoises in mind when you asked me if'n there was water 'tween Red Gulch and where we met, but the way you was actin' up at the time, I thought it best not to say anythin'. 'Sides, desert tortoises is where you find 'em, and I didn't think I was goin' to be lucky. 'Nother thing, I just played like I was cashin' in, so's you'd leave me behind an' give me a chance to get at the water bladders."

Slade's lips were curled bitterly. A sudden spasm twisted his face as Tatum finished. Then it relaxed, and a blankness crept into it. His hands fell away from his chest. His eyes closed. Slade didn't move again.

Holstering his guns, the sheriff bent to pick up his hat and the fallen saddlebags. He nodded in grim confirmation as he opened and peered into them. Then he turned to the crowd behind him, calling for volunteers to carry away the bodies of Slade and Bull. He got plenty of help.

The sheriff was turning to follow the procession, when Tatum plucked detainingly at his sleeve.

"You . . . you think there'll be a reward, sheriff?"

The other grinned slightly. "There's bound to be. This is a lot of money, Pete. You'll get what's comin' to you, don't worry. If you hadn't used your head like you did, those two coyotes would of got clean away."

Later, after he had explained everything to the satisfaction of a mob of curious Red Gulch townsfolk, Tatum used his newly-won prestige to obtain on credit a fresh supply of bacon and flour. Then, with his water canteen full, he started out with Jupiter for the edge of town to make camp for the night.

He was content. With the reward money furnishing a new stake at the bank, there would be more prospecting trips—a lot of them, in fact. And he'd make a strike. We was sure of that.

As he walked along with Jupiter at his side, he tried to strike up a quarrel with himself. The effort proved a complete failure.

For once Pete Tatum was completely at peace with Pete Tatum.

THE END

THE KID'S KILLER

By

H. R. STANTON

PATRICK FLOYD GARRETT was one of the most famous peace officers of the Southwest. His outstanding feat was the capture and killing of notorious Billy the Kid, the western terror. It furnished a fitting climax to his notable career. This man who was to become a frontier officer was a Southerner by birth. In 1856 when he was six years old, his family moved from Alabama to Louisiana. There his father was the owner of a huge plot of land to which it was supposed that Patrick might be the heir. After his father's death the estate dwindled down to nothing; young Garrett's mother soon followed her husband to the grave.

In 1869 Pat Garrett was alone in the world without family or home. He turned his eyes westward and set out to seek his fortune in that untrammeled land. His first job was that of a cowhand on a ranch in Texas. Restlessness and the desire to explore the wonders of the land about him drew Garrett to the buffalo range on the plains of the Panhandle. In February of 1878, he and two hardy companions galloped into Fort Sumner. They had few supplies with them. Except for the powder and lead with which they hunted food, their saddle blankets and horses, they had no possessions to speak of. Their pockets were empty.

But work was plentiful for those who wanted it. At Fort Sumner, Pat settled down to an orderly existence. Two years after his arrival at the fort, he was married. It would have been hard to foretell during this period of his life, that Garrett was to become one of the most famous man-hunters of his day. Near what is now the flourishing city of Roswell, he lived a quiet and peaceful life.

This steady routine of frontier farming did not last for long. Urged by friends to run for the office, Garrett was elected as sheriff of Lincoln County. It was a tough job from the start, and great courage was required to stick it out. The outlaws of the region made clear their sentiments. From near and far, threats came pouring in; Garrett was warned that if he attempted to serve any processes, he would be killed. But the new sheriff did not swerve from the path set out for him. The Governor, confident in his ability, told him to go ahead, to disregard technicalities when necessary and to go to any lengths to see that the county was cleaned up.

If one were to examine the true facts surrounding his career, it might perhaps be found that Garrett arrested a bandit and got his warrant later. He took the matter of establishing law and order in that section of the country in his own hands and did it in his own way. Garrett's methods were crude, but functional in every respect. Sometimes he boarded his prisoners out of his own pocket. His word was never questioned for he had established the reputation for keeping his promise to bandit and honest man alike regardless of what had been said about them.

By 1884 Garrett's fame had spread. He organized and led a company of Texas Rangers in Wheeler County, Texas. Later he was called upon to manage the affairs of a cattle detective agency. For a few years after that he led the conventional life of a rancher and attempted to make a living from the soil. But when W. T. Thornton, the governor of New Mexico, requested that he fill the unexpired term of Numa Raymond as sheriff, Garrett was glad to get back in the game again. Elected to serve two subsequent terms in that office, no man held a better record for bravery.

Garrett has gone down in the annals of Western history as the killer of Billy the Kid. His hunt began shortly after the Kid and his gang killed the agency clerk on the Mescalero reservation. Since the crime was committed on government property, a Federal warrant was placed in the hands of Pat Garrett, then deputy United States Marshal and sheriff-elect.

Garrett, in his usual efficient manner, tracked the men down. They were camped at a ranch about nine miles east of Fort Sumner. Four of the Kid's henchmen were with him; all were killers. Knowing that Garrett was on their trail, they were eager and ready to let lead fly in his direction.

O'Folliard and Pickett were picked off by Garrett and his posse when they ventured into town. A hectic chase on horseback resulted in O'Folliard's death. Pickett, though wounded, managed to get away.

Riding swiftly ahead of Garrett and his men, Pickett was able to warn Billy the Kid of the posse's approach. The gang made the huge stone ranch house their fortress and prepared arms and powder for the battle they knew was to come. Garrett, with a posse made up of a mere handful of men, came upon their prey silently in the dead of night. The house was surrounded just before dawn. Bowdre, the first of the gang to venture out in the gray light of morning, got three bullets in his chest.

Stumbling backward in the open doorway, he was met by the Kid who pushed a gun in his hand and ordered him to go out and kill Garrett before he should die himself. With the blood gushing from his wounds, Bowdre staggered in Garrett's direction falling dead after taking three steps.

Garrett, in the meanwhile, had eliminated the bandit's one means of escape. He did a spectacular bit of shooting which cut the ropes holding the horses behind the house. These two shots surprised Garrett, himself; he always considered them the most remarkable of his career.

The talk inside the house now began to dwell on the subject of surrender. But the Kid still wanted to hold out. Garrett tried a new approach. He sent for food for his men. The smell of cooking was too much for the hungry outlaws. They stuck a dirty white rag on a gun barrel and pushed it out a shattered window offering to surrender. One by one they emerged and were disarmed.

The outlaws were taken through Las Vegas where one of them was wanted for murder. Half the town surrounded the train in the depot yards, and Garrett had good reason to believe that a lynching party might take place. He took his own life in his hands by making the Kid a startling offer. If the mob rushed in the door of the car, Garrett promised to toss back a six-shooter to the Kid so that he could help fight. But this drastic measure never became necessary. At the last moment the train was pulled out of the yard.

Billy the Kid was tried and condemned to death. This might have been the end for him, but a few days before the execution was scheduled to take place, the Kid killed two deputies who were guarding him, and was able to stage an escape. Garrett was on his trail again. Inwardly he knew that he would never be able to take the outlaw alive. It was to be one or the other of them if they ever met again. Trailing the Kid back up to the settlement at Fort Sumner with two deputies, they got wind of a rumor that he was in or near Pete Maxwell's house. In reality, the Kid was lying with his boots off in the house of an old Mexican nearby.

Unaware of the presence of Garrett and his men, the Kid got up, borrowed a butcher knife from the old Mexican, and went over to Maxwell's to cut a piece of meat from the quarter Pete had on hand. Garrett was in the house talking to Pete in low tones at the time. Maxwell did not want to talk very much.

In the dim light, the Kid didn't suspect anything to be wrong. He could not see Garrett's face and had not heard his voice. Asking Pete who the stranger was, the Kid leaned toward them in the darkness waving his six-shooter loosely about.

Garrett could not afford to wait for a formal introduction. He fired and ducked. The Kid's bullets came high, missing their mark, but Garrett's aim had been faultless. In that first flash of gunfire, Billy the Kid met death without knowing who had killed him. He lies in an unmarked grave where Garrett buried him.

A BRAND NEW
"Johnny Fletcher" Novel
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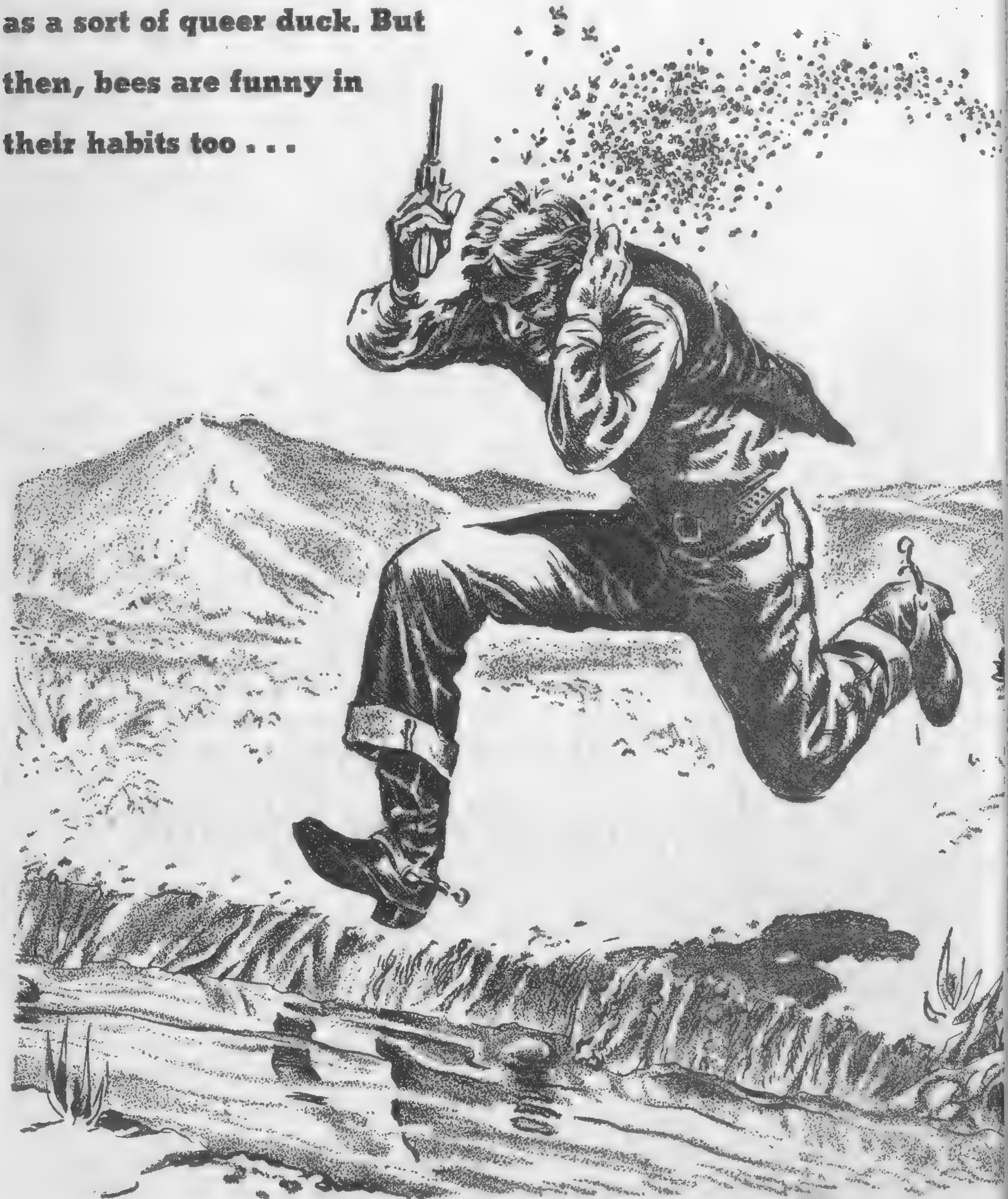
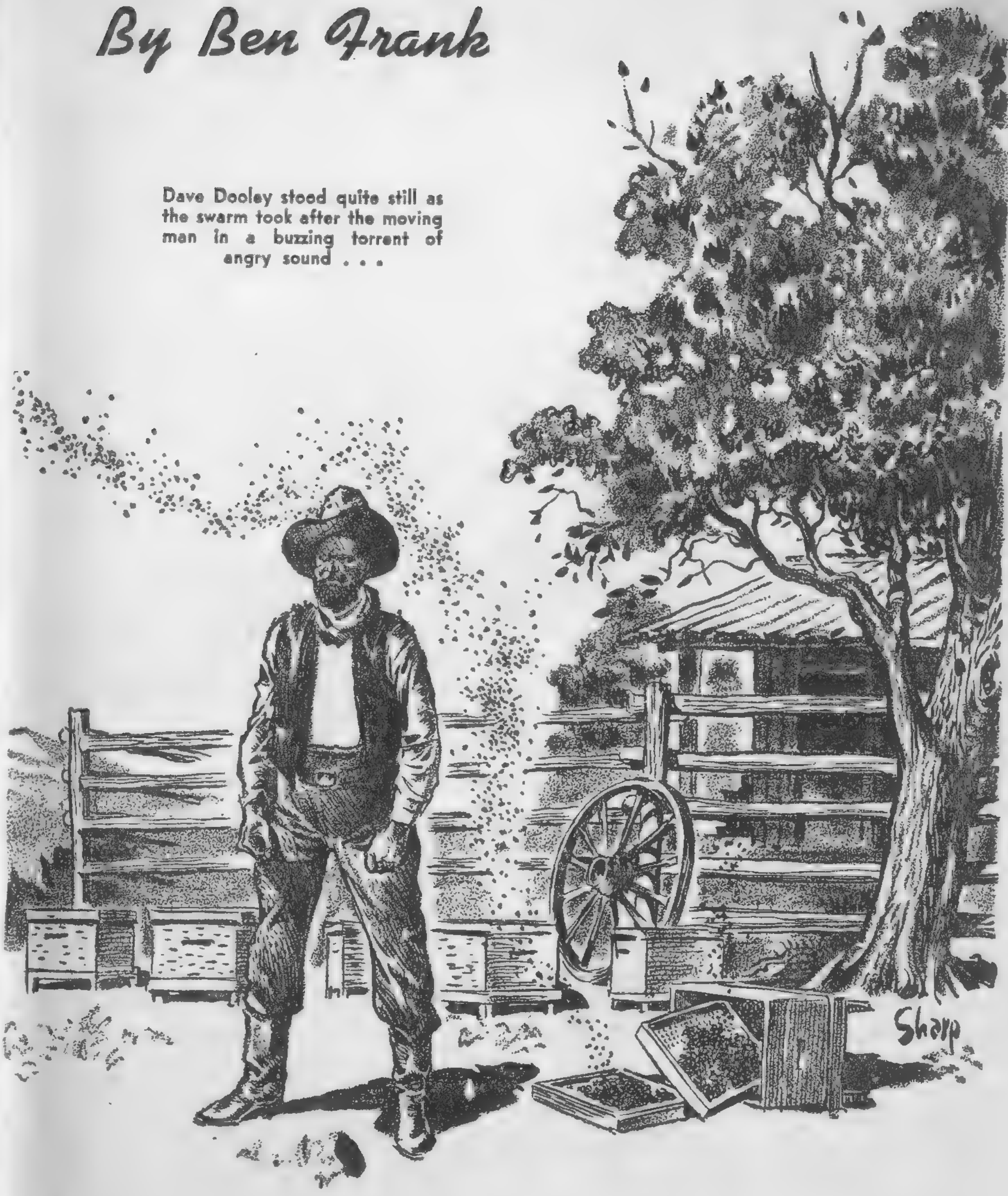
FRANK GRUBER
A Two-Dollar Detective Book for 25c
"The Honest Dealer"
IN
MAMMOTH DETECTIVE . . . *On Sale Now*

FUNNY ABOUT BEES

A rancher who raises bees is looked on as a sort of queer duck. But then, bees are funny in their habits too . . .



By Ben Frank



Dave Dooley stood quite still as the swarm took after the moving man in a buzzing torrent of angry sound . . .

THE warm red sun stood an hour above its hiding place behind White Horse Mountain when old Dave Dooley hobbled across his sweet-clover patch to the neat row of bee hives that squatted like white doll houses on the south slope of the big irrigation ditch. He liked to stand around and watch his bees at work. Funny about bees. A man, he reckoned, could learn a heap by just watching honey-bees and the way they did things. Always busy. No time for foolishness and getting into trouble.

And thinking about trouble made him think of young Dave, his son. But young Dave's trouble was a thing of the past, and he was an old fool to keep bringing it up in his mind, now that the youngster was back home and making good in Nat Nichol's General Store.

Yep, old Dave reckoned, everything had turned out about right with young Dave's trouble buried deep in the past. So deep that it wasn't likely that anyone in the little cowtown of Burnham would ever dig it up.

Not that it was anything to be too ashamed of, considering Dave's youth and inexperience, but Nat Nichols was the kind who wouldn't understand. And June, old Nat's daughter, might feel a shame that was not her due. June and young Dave were figuring on being married right soon.

The bandy-legged little old man stopped behind the nearest bee hive. The clover-scented breeze fanned through his tuft of white whiskers, and the bees sang around him in a friendly way. A small grin played over his leathery face. Yep, a man could learn a heap just from watching honey-bees.

Funny about bees—as long as their lives and homes went undisturbed, you didn't have to worry about getting stung. But let danger threaten something dear to them; then look out!

Old Dave was like that himself. Always had been, even back in his cowpunching days before a bronc had rolled over on him, and he'd had to give up the saddle for bee raising.

"Howdy," somebody clipped in a gritty voice.

OLD Dave jumped, and a bee buzzed threateningly about his ear. He stood very still for a few moments; then turned his head slowly, remembering that bees don't like sudden movements.

For the first time he saw the man sitting on top of the bank of the irrigation ditch. A thin, hollow-chested man with a pasty face, streaked with a red scar that zig-zagged down from the outside corner of his left eye.

Old Dave's blood ran cold. He knew this man. Knew him from young Dave's description.

"He's mean and scary," young Dave had blurted that day he'd confessed about his trouble. "They call him Pasty Pascoe, and he got the scar in a knifing. Honest, Pa, I couldn't get away from him. He—"

Pasty Pascoe tossed his cigaret into the swirling water in the deep ditch below him and unfolded his long legs. He stood up, and a spasm of coughing shook him. The scar turned a deeper red.

"I'm a stranger in these parts," he said in the same gritty voice. "Lookin' fer a friend of mine. A young feller by the name of Dave Dooley. Reckon you might know where he lives."

Old Dave got his voice up out of his boots. "What d'yuh want with Dave?" he husked. "What—"

The man's pasty face tightened. "Mebbe, ol' man," he said scratchily, "it ain't none of yore business!"

"I know yuh," old Dave blurted. "Yo're name's Pascoe. Yuh got Dave into trouble. I'm his Pa. I know—"

His voice choked on him.

Pasty Pascoe grinned. "Glad to meetcha," he said.

He moved along the bank of the ditch toward old Dave. His coat swung back, revealing a bone-handled sixgun stuck under his belt.

"Now that I'm free again," he said, still grinning, "thanks to a smart lawyer and some money, I figured it'd be nice to look Dave up. I got some plans fer him."

"He won't have nothin' to do with yuh!" the old man panted. "Dave's goin' straight! He's a good—"

"Yeah, I know," Pasty Pascoe said with an impatient flip of his long-fingered gun hand. "But from what I've heard, I reckon he won't be anxious fer certain people to know about them six months he spent over in the Randolph County jail."

Of course, Pascoe meant old Nat Nichols and June. Nat who wouldn't have a jailbird working for him, or who wouldn't let his daughter marry one.

OLD Dave felt himself grow sick, thinking of young Dave who'd learned his lesson. And of June who had eyes the color of a cloudless summer sky and a quick bright laugh that the old man liked.

Peace-loving and hard working—except when something he held dear was threatened; and then filled with a matchless fury. Honey bees were like that—and so was old Dave Dooley.

He doubled his skinny fists. "You git outa here!" he rattled. "Git out an' stay out!"

Pasty Pascoe grinned down at the old man. He pulled the bone-handled gun from under his belt and fondled it with his long fingers.

"Sure, sure," he said, "I'll git out—just as soon as Dave helps me with a little job I got planned. There really ain't nothin' fer yuh to get excited about. This safe I've got spotted ain't nothin' more'n a tin cracker box. There ain't no risk to speak of. An' there's some good money packed away in it. I need a honest lookin' feller like Dave to—"

The gritty voice ground on, but old Dave wasn't listening. He was thinking back to the time when his son, just a headstrong kid, ran away from home. That had just about broken the oldster, Dave being all he had in the world to love.

A few years later, the kid had come back, changed. He'd lost his swaggering walk and his big talk. There was a scared and subdued look about him. It had been some time before he'd told his Pa about those run-away years. How he'd fallen in with an owl-hooter by the name of Pasty Pascoe.

To a kid like Dave who didn't know the score, Pascoe seemed to be quite a fellow. Quick with gun and knife. Always in the money. Like a fool, he'd let Pascoe talk him into changing the brand on a steer.

"Just a little joke on a friend of mine," Pascoe had said at the time.

Afterwards Dave had learned it wasn't a joke. It was Pascoe's way of getting him started down the owlhoot trail. How far he'd have gone down that trail if Pascoe hadn't slipped up on trying to rob a half-drunk cowboy, old Dave shuddered to think. But Pascoe, an old offender, had been sentenced to ten years, while young Dave got only six months in the Randolph County jail.

Those six months had been good for the kid. It had steadied him, made a man of him. He'd come home and gone to work for Nat Nichols. He'd made good. He'd fallen in love with old Nat's girl. That's when he'd told old Dave about Pasty Pascoe and those six months in jail.

"What'll I do, Pa?" he'd asked, his lean, brown face screwed up in a worried frown. "Shall I tell Nat an' June?"

THEY'D talked it over for a long time, he and young Dave. Randolph County was a long ways off—clear over on the other side of the mountains. It didn't seem likely that anyone around Burnham would ever know about Dave and Pasty Pascoe. And Pascoe was put away for ten years where he wouldn't bother anyone. Ten years seemed like a long, long time.

Remembering how hard-headed old Nat was about such things and how June might be hurt by knowing the truth, they'd decided to keep the secret between themselves. At the time, that seemed best. But they hadn't figured on the one thing that had happened. On Pasty Pascoe getting out of jail after serving only a small part of his sentence.

It had been a mistake not to tell Nat and June, old Dave knew now as he stared at the pasty-faced man standing on the bank of the irrigation ditch. Young Dave should have told them right off. Maybe they'd understood then how it was. But now with the wedding only a few days off—

He shuddered. Anything could happen now. Dave might kill Pascoe, or die trying. Or he might go back to the owlhoot trail. And old Nat might never let June see Dave again. She might not want to see him again. Dave's future seemed to shatter before the old man's eyes.

He stared at Pasty Pascoe. The owlhooter was dangerous. He was a killer. He'd knifed a man. He was a thief. Worse than that he'd tried to make young Dave over into a coyote like himself. And now—

A cold fury began to swell in old Dave.

Pascoe stuck the gun back under his belt.

"Let's go," he said, his voice grinding into old Dave's thinking. "I reckon you'd better take me to where I can have a little confab with yore boy. Some'ers where we won't be seen together. I reckon that'd be best, figurin' as how I intend to use him fer a front."

Old Dave didn't take his eyes off the pasty face. He thought of the bees who die in the wild fury of protecting the things that seem dear to them. He was like that—ready to face anything for Dave and Dave's girl.

His hand groped out, clutched the corners of the whitewashed bee hive. He shoved. The hive toppled over with a splintering crack. The lid slid off to one side. The hive rolled down the slope toward the sweet-smelling clover patch. Yellow golden honey spilled out of broken combs. Black bees swirled up from the wreckage like smoke on a roaring wind. Fury-filled bees looking for vengeance.

Old Dave Dooley kept his eyes on Pascoe's horror-filled face. Funny about bees, he remembered. They don't see like people see. They don't notice things that don't move. It's motion that they see, like slapping at them, or running, or trying to beat them off. And Pasty Pascoe wouldn't know that.

BEES swarmed over the old man, beat against his face and arms, tangled in his whiskers. He fought down the impulse to brush them off, to turn and go plunging across the clover patch.

And all the time he saw the whirring, angry cloud move on up the slope toward the tall man with the horrified, pasty face.

Old Dave had been right—Pasty Pascoe didn't know about bees. He started to run. He screamed. His long arms thrashed the air like storm-swept windmill blades. He stumbled to his knees, tried to cover his face. He cried out once again, leaped to his feet and went blindly plunging into the irrigation ditch.

The bees had moved away from old Dave's rigid body. Only one or two persisted in buzzing angrily about his head. Very slowly he moved up the slope. One cheek smarted painfully where he'd been stung. He reckoned if that bee hadn't got all excited about getting tangled up in his whiskers, he wouldn't have got a single sting.

He reached the irrigation ditch. A few bees still darted angrily just above the surface of the swirling snow water, but Pasty Pascoe wasn't in sight.

The water, deep, cloudy, snarling, rushed ever onward toward the thirsty land miles away. Seconds stretched into minutes. The surface remained unbroken.

The sun suddenly dropped behind White Horse Mountain, and as suddenly it dawned on old Dave that a man couldn't stay under water that long and be alive.

He drew a deep, quick breath, scooped up a chunk of mud and put it against his burning cheek. It felt good there, cool, soothing.

He sighed softly. Yep, he reckoned, a man could learn a heap by just watching the way honey bees did things.

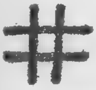
THE END

COW COUNTRY
QUIZ

By
JAMES A. HINES

1. Here are three famous cattle brands. Can you name them?

1.



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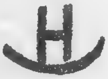

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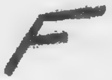
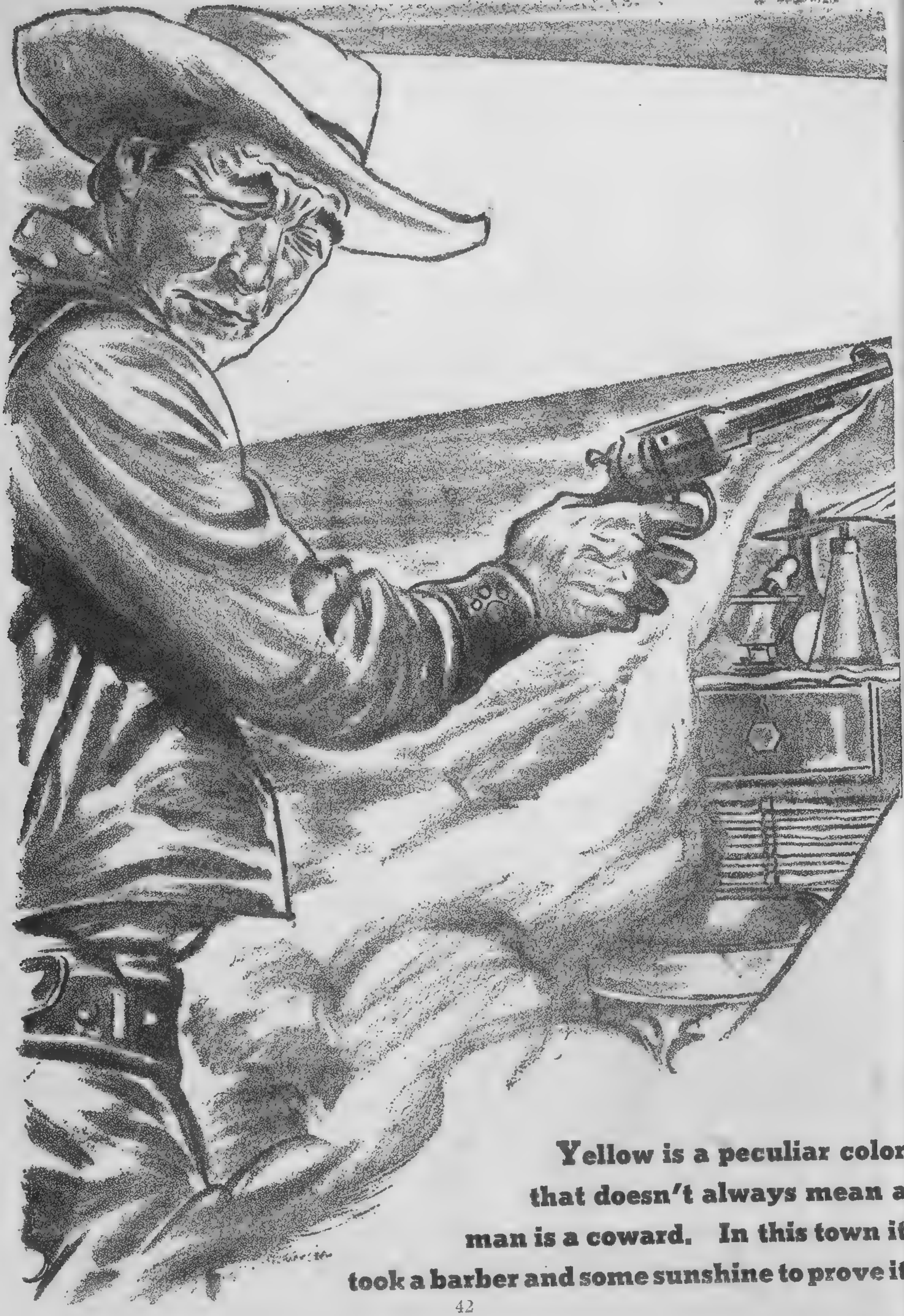


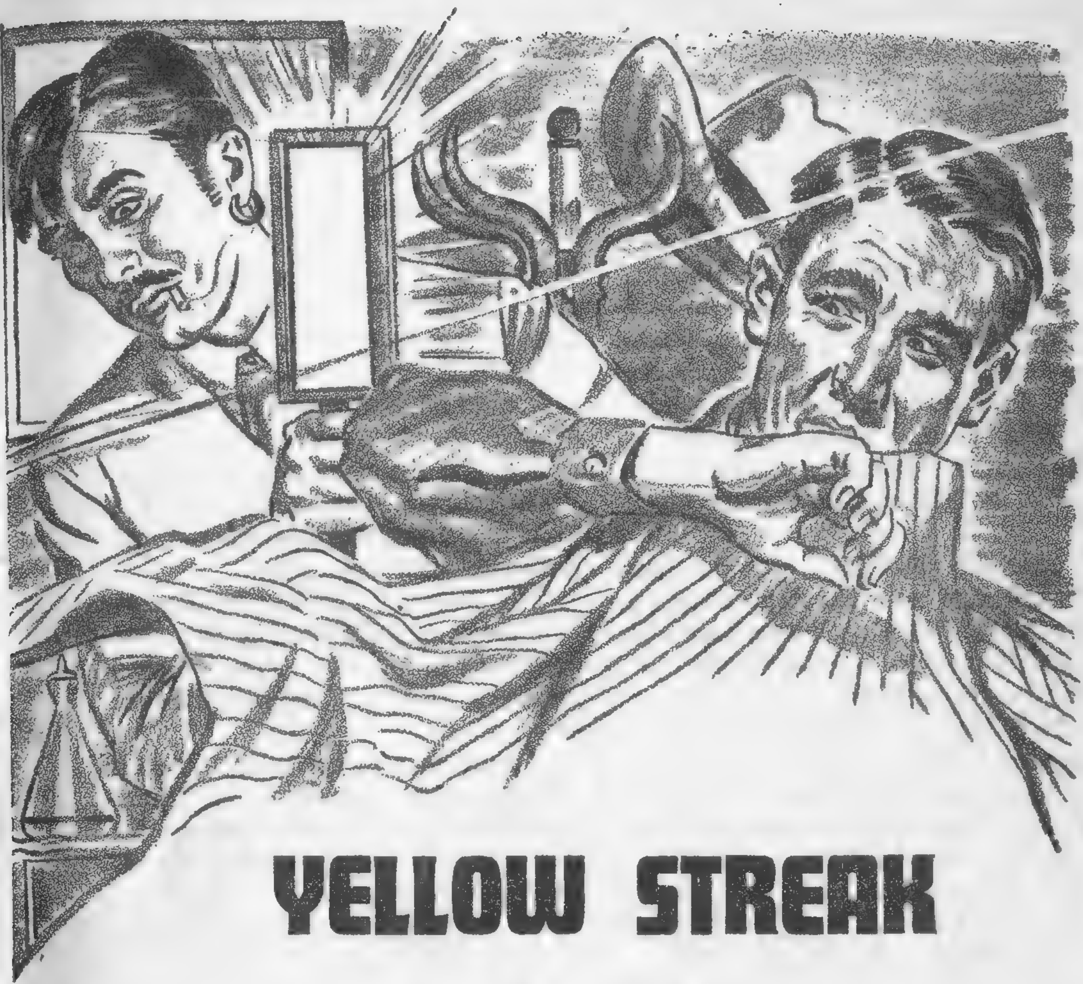
2. What is the difference between a broncho and an outlaw horse—according to the Western's way of thinking?
3. Two old-time cowmen are talking, one says; "The first thing I taught that roan hoss' of mine, was to 'lead.'" What did the old-timer mean?
4. When a horse has learned to obey "neck reining," what has he learned to do?
5. The cowboy's saddle is a heavy affair. How much does his saddle generally weigh?
6. True or false. Bullhide chaps, and leggings are all the same in a cowpuncher's lingo.
7. What does the Spanish word "la reata," mean?
8. Every old-time cattleman remembers the winter of 1886-87. What happened that winter that seriously affected the range?
9. In Roy Bean, the old-time cowboy song, what did Roy Bean do to old Pap Wyndid's steer?
10. What two western states are the two largest states in the Union?
11. Who first discovered the Painted Desert, and gave it its name "El Pintado Desireto?"
12. Carson City, the capital of Nevada, was named in what person's honor?
13. What are placer mines?
14. In cowboy lingo, what is the difference between "sleepers" and "slick ears?"
15. In the language of the Westerner, a "hackamore" is: A cowpuncher's socks? A rope? A bitless rope bridle? A Spanish name for spur?
16. What is meant by a longrider?
17. True or false? In the days of the open range each cowboy had a string of horses. Could his boss borrow one without getting the cowboy's permission?
18. Who or what were Sam Bass and Little Dick West?
19. If a cowboy said he was going after the "Cocinero," what would he be going after?
20. What plant is known as the "water barrel of the desert"?

(Answers on page 47)

WILLIAM HOPSON'S NEW NOVEL — NEXT ISSUE



Yellow is a peculiar color that doesn't always mean a man is a coward. In this town it took a barber and some sunshine to prove it



YELLOW STREAK

by Emil Petaja

SUNSET gleamed like melted gold on the windows of San Bueno pueblo. Young Johnny Ortega whistled, strutting lithely down the plank walk.

The tin star on Johnny's loud shirt gleamed, too. He had shined it up. Although he hadn't worn it long, he was very proud of that star.

His white teeth flashed in a polite grin when Miss Calmus, the old maid schoolteacher, simpered by. He tipped his creamy white sombrero back over his shiny black hair to a rakish angle. Unconsciously, he made a striking figure, with his Irish blue eyes, inherited from his mother; and that rich olive complexion, a legacy from Juan Ortega, his ranchero father. Brand new ivory-handled guns swung at his hips.

He was happy. To be sent from Los Angeles to be sheriff of this beautiful California pueblo, at such an early age. That was a good thing. And to have a sweetheart like Rosita, the barber's niece with the shining dark eyes. That was even better.

He was blissfully unware of the the tongue-cluckings that followed him down the street. He didn't hear Zeke

Cramer, the feed store owner, say to Al Hitchcock, who furnished pine coffins, "We hadn't ought to of done it, Al. When we sent fur a new sheriff from Los Angeles we didn't reckon he'd turn out a dudish, grinning sprout!"

"Yup," the coffin maker nodded absently. He inspected the whistling youngster keenly, with an eye for business. "When Rod Manker gets around to smokin' him up, like he done the last two, I'll have a neat job on my hands."

Zeke Cramer chuckled ghoulishly. He pointed. "Better get started on thet coffin, Al. There's Rod Manker, now!"

JOHNNY ORTEGA saw the town bad man, too. He stopped dead in his tracks. The smile disappeared. His amiable features went cool and tight. His eyes shone alertly.

Rod Manker was more than just a name to scare kids with. He had bullied his way into considerable power, and was suspected of owlhoot activity. Johnny was fast collecting enough evidence to string him up. But Manker was a hard man to hang, as Johnny's predecessors found out.

Up to now, the young sheriff's job was apple pie. That was because he'd not met up with Manker yet. The gunwolf had been out of town since he took office.

Right now Manker was indulging in his favorite sport, making a fat man dance to the tune of his six-guns. The fat man was Uncle Lopez, the barber.

Uncle Lopez was getting old. But not too old, Johnny mused, to stand up to the lobo. Not too old to be a man.

His cheeks flushed. Rosita's uncle —waving a towel, prancing up and down the planks in front of the adobe barber shop like a loco hombre!

Big, shaggy-haired Manker showed his yellow fangs, roaring with obscene merriment. Two would-be sidekicks tittered behind him.

Manker pulled triggers, and hot lead drilled the planking around the fat man's gyrating feet.

"Put up your guns, Manker!" Johnny's voice was like the crack of a rifle.

For a moment all of San Bueno held its breath. Johnny Ortega had yet to prove himself, whether he was more than just a fancy-dressing, pleasant-smiling colt. This was it.

Manker blinked sourly. He sheathed his guns, shambled a step or two closer, squinting at the new sheriff ominously.

Uncle Lopez stopped dancing. His white moustache wobbled; his red face turned greenish with terror.

"No, Johnny! Don't!" he bleated.

Johnny's eyes flickered on him, then went back to Manker. They smashed into the gunwolf's. They were like blue ice.

"I want you to leave Uncle Lopez alone from now on, understand?" Johnny said crisply, rocking back on his heels. His muscles were taut, his hands carelessly poised.

"So you wanna die young!" Manker growled.

"Just leave him alone, that's all."

Maybe Manker took Johnny's second mildly spoken statement as an admission of cowardice. Anyway, he was confident of his own gun power. "No wet-eared brat is goin' to tell Rod Manker what he can do, and can't!" he spit out wrathfully.

With that, his right hand snaked out his hot-tempered .45.

TO THE onwatchers, sunset washed across the young sheriff's boyish face, it was no less than a miracle. It happened so fast they couldn't believe it. They gaped, and rubbed their eyes.

One second Johnny was just standing there—calm, ready. Less than the next his ivory-handled six-shooter was out and blazing.

Manker's iron spun to the dust. Even he couldn't believe it at first. Then, snarling, he started to claw out his twin smoker. But a second jutting fang from Johnny's hip cut his sleeve warningly, and he changed his mind.

Snarling curses, he picked up his six-gun. His pin-pointed eyes lingered on Johnny malevolently for a moment, then he shambled off into the dusk.

Johnny watched him swing through the bat-wings of the saloon, then turned to Uncle Lopez. The fat man winced under his look.

"You were *magnifico,* Johnny!" He hung his head dolefully. "Me, I am one beeg coward. *Caramba!* Nobody in my family was ever such a beeg coward like me. Rosita does not deserve such an uncle." He waved his hands helplessly. "But when I see Manker pull out his guns—my stomach, it turn to jelly. I'm sorry I am such one beeg coward, Johnny."

Johnny laughed and slapped his shoulder. "Can't be helped, I guess. Anyway, do you think you can stop shivering and shaking long enough to give me a shave and a trim, before I go to call on Rosita?"

In the week that followed, Johnny was warned on all sides to beware. He had earned the respect and admiration of the citizens, and they hated to see one so young court death.

Johnny was the first man ever to beat Manker to the draw, the first to denude the gunwolf of his power. He would not suffer such an insult lightly. Go away, they said. Marry Rosita at once, and fly.

Even she, her eyes shining with fear for him, whispered, "You must be very careful. He is full of tricks, like *el lobo.* He will work some mischief to keel you, Johnny."

Johnny grinned. "These friends of mine will stand by me," he said, patting his shiny guns affectionately.

IT WAS the next Saturday, sun-washed evening, that Johnny whistled his way down to Uncle Lopez's barber shop again, for his usual shave and trim before calling on Rosita. It was the custom to present a first class appearance when calling on one's bride-to-be.

Uncle Lopez greeted him with a huge smile.

"Caramba, Johnny! You have worked one beeg miracle!"

"Yes?" Johnny smiled, loosening his silk neckerchief, unstrapping his gun-belt and hanging it alongside his sombrero, on a nail in the wall.

Uncle Lopez chuckled.

"Rod Manker—he is vamoosed! All week no one has seen him. The lobo, she is scared from our young Johnny."

Johnny relaxed back in the barber chair. Uncle Lopez chortled on happily while he whipped a big white apron around the sheriff and tied it behind his neck.

Rod Manker was gone. He had learned his lesson. At last San Bueno had a sheriff who could outshoot him. He knew his day was over, so he had sneaked away like a mangy yellow dog, with his tail between his legs.

But Johnny was far from convinced. Manker's owlhoot raiding carried him away from the pueblo for weeks sometimes. He hadn't seen the last of the gunwolf. However, a week or so would give him just the time he needed to break down scared witnesses to Manker's evil doings. Then, when he got back, would come the showdown.

And if it pleased Uncle Lopez to think his personal bogey-man was gone for good, let him.

The fat man lingered painstakingly over Johnny's neck trim. He was an artist at his work. There must not be so much as a single hair out of place. Finally, with a sigh of satisfaction, Uncle Lopez laid down his scissors and his comb, picking up the square hand mirror off the shelf to show Johnny what a fine job he'd done.

Johnny's eyes were half-closed. He was dreaming of Rosita and the little rancho they would buy some day.

A shadow fell across him. He heard Uncle Lopez give a startled whimper of fright.

He opened his eyes to see Rod Manker standing in the doorway. The gunwolf was alone. He wore a leer of evil triumph.

The burnished gold sunset, flooding through the doorway, sent his elongated shadow across the barber's apron that enveloped Johnny from his spurred boots to his neck.

"Reach for your gun, tin-star!" There was a rasping gloat to Manker's voice.

Suddenly Johnny understood. Rod Manker knew he always came to the barber shop at this time. He had figured it this way. This was one of his slimy tricks Rosita had warned him against.

Manker knew Johnny wasn't wearing his guns. He could see them hanging on the nail, yards away. But after he had knifed the sheriff down, he would say innocently, "How'd I know he wasn't wearin' his irons? He had that white sheet up to his neck—how could I tell?"

JOHNNY felt his muscles tighten into wire knots. His mouth went grim. He could make a lunge for his guns, but he wouldn't have a chance, if he did. He sat there, stiff, waiting.

"Well?" Manker mocked. "Why don't you draw?"

Uncle Lopez moaned. His flabby lips quivered with terror. So did his hands. They shook so hard he almost dropped the mirror he was holding.

As the mirror shook, Uncle Lopez suddenly noticed something dance across the opposite wall. A thrill coursed through him.

Johnny, whom he loved *mucho,* was about to be murdered, fanged down by the snake who had caused him so much misery that sometimes he lay awake all night hating him. And Rosita—without Johnny she would die, too.

Maybe. . . .

Quick! He must do it before his cowardly mind melted into mush. He would do it! He would!

Manker got tired of gloating. With a snarl, he pulled his guns.

Uncle Lopez did it. He lifted the mirror up and moved it so that a streaming yellow streak of vivid sunset reflected itself in the gunwolf's eyes. Blinded by the blare of light, Manker shot wild.

His lead tore into the ceiling. But he caught on, now. He ducked the reflected streak. Baring his fangs, he blazed again. And this time he didn't miss. One bullet sent the mirror racketing out of the barber's hand. The other burned into Uncle Lopez's shoulder. He swayed dizzily, then the floor reached up and clouted his triple chin.

The diversion gave Johnny just the edge he needed. Tossing off the big apron, he left the barber chair in a rush, gained the wall. His gun was out of its holster, jutting flame and powdersmoke.

Manker arched back under the impact of knifing lead. Mouthing, he lurched heavily against the jamb. His guns blazed once more, ineffectually. With a grunt of protest, he crashed to the planking outside. In the last rays of the sun, his mouth twitched, and then he lay still.

Johnny knelt anxiously by the barber.

"You were *magnifico,*" he said huskily.

Uncle Lopez opened his eyes. He winced when Johnny ripped his shirt to bandage his wound, then he smiled. His blood was running like red wine on the clean barber shop floor. But his body was stout; it would heal. The important thing was—Johnny was safe, and he need not break Rosita's heart with bad news.

Just before he closed his eyes, Uncle Lopez murmured, grinning, "Preety smart, eh, Johnny? For one beeg coward like me?"

THE END

ANSWERS TO COW COUNTRY QUIZ

(Quiz on page 41)

1. 1. Pig Pen. 2. Rocking H. 3. Running F.
2. According to the Westerner's way of thinking, a broncho is an untamed horse, whereas an outlaw horse is a horse that has been spoiled in breaking.
3. The old-time cowman meant that he taught the roan horse to follow at the pull of a rope or rein, instead of holding back.
4. He has learned to turn at the pressure of the rein on his neck, instead of at the pull of the bit.
5. Forty pounds or more.
6. True. Bullhide chaps or leggings are all the same in a cowpuncher's lingo.
7. The Spanish word "la reata," means lariat, the cowboy's rope.
8. The Montana, Wyoming and Dakota ranges were lashed by blizzards, and when spring came around thousands of carcasses marked the end of the old days.
9. Roy Bean put his R B brand on old Pap's steer.
10. Texas and California.
11. Coronado, a Spanish explorer, discovered the Painted Desert and gave it its name "El Pintado Desireto."
12. Kit Carson, the noted scout.
13. Placer mines are mines yielding metal—bearing sands and gravels.
14. Sleepers are calves earmarked, not branded. Slick-ears are calves not yet branded.
15. A hackamore is a bitless rope bridle, with a single rein.
16. A person outside of the law—an outlaw.
17. True and No. The Cowpunchers were an independent class of people. Even the boss or the owner of the ranch could not borrow a horse out of the cowboy's string without first getting his permission.
18. Both men were old-time Western outlaws. Sam Bass was known as Texas's most Popular Bandit. Little Dick West was a member of the notorious Bill Doolin's gang.
19. He would be going after the cook.
20. The saguaro or giant cactus.

THE END

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

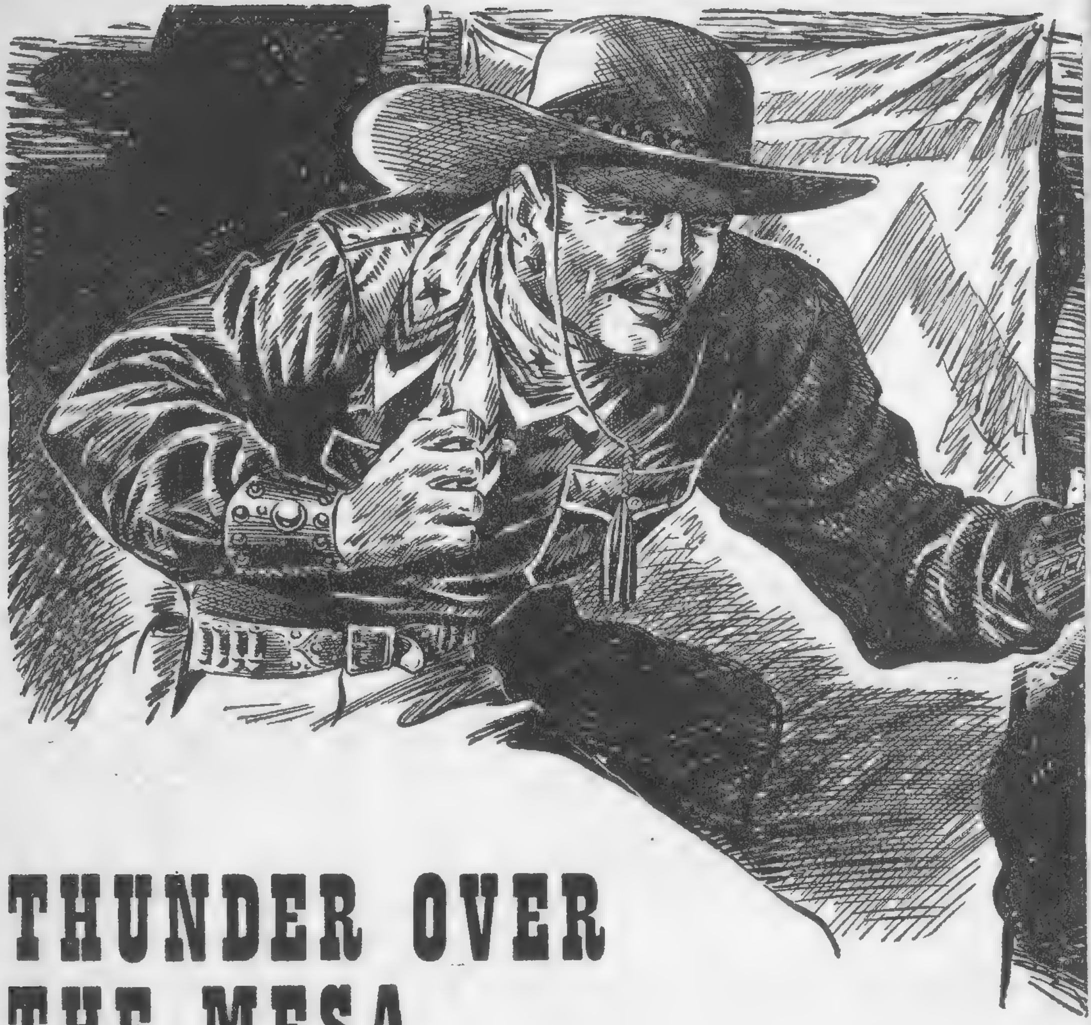
By GARY LEE HORTON

ALTHOUGH the days of the Gold Rush are long past, and even forgotten by some, they can never be lost to coming generations. The mark of the hardy pioneers who set off into the West in search of their yellow fortunes is still upon the land. Everywhere are the names that these men put upon claims, mines, roads, and rivers. The backwoods had a sort of lusty humor in its naming. Many counties had crossroads with such names as Pancake Hollow, Knock-em-Stiff, or Hell-fer-Sartain. Whiskey Creek marked the place where someone had once run a still.

Through these names, we of this day and age can get a keen insight into the rough and tumble times of our ancestors. The miners of a certain camp cut short a crime wave by hanging three men on a convenient tree, and thus it became known as Hangtown. Similar incidents must have been the inspiration for Chicken Thief Flat, Cut Throat Bar, and Gouge Eye. Murder Creek, Deadman Creek, and Dead Indian Creek give very obvious clues to the episodes which created their names.

Today, riding through that country, one takes those names so much for granted that the story behind them seldom comes to mind. It is not one tale, but thousands of them that stand revealed by the names one finds on the map of the West. Many lives, separate personalities, and experiences went into the building of the country, and now only the names remain as evidence.

THE END



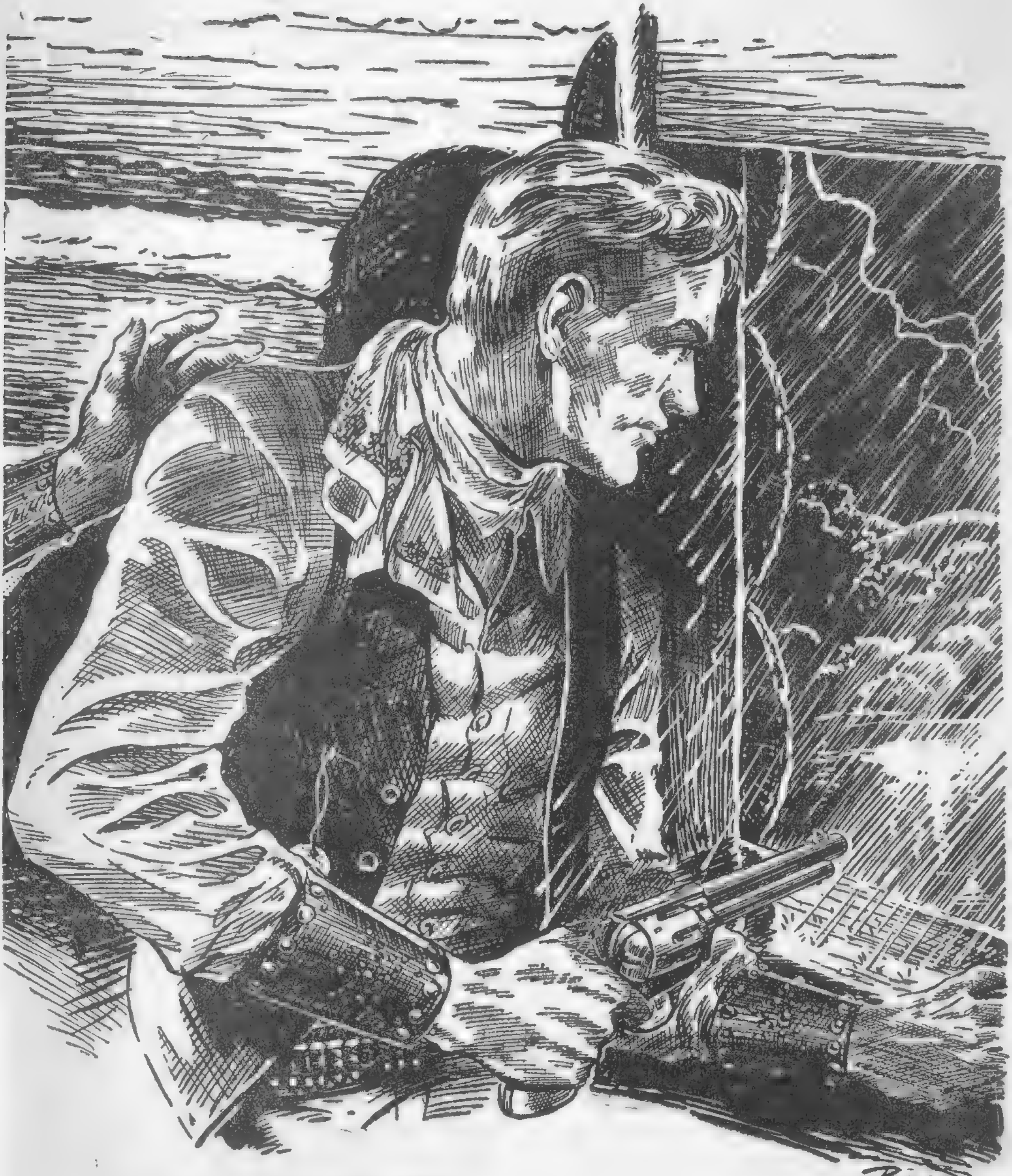
THUNDER OVER THE MESA

by Berkeley Livingston

Sometimes the sound of thunder in a man's ears can drown out the voice of danger . . .

CLINT BRENT had to be in that cabin! I was positive that I had not seen any one leave. And there was only one man lying in the bright moonlight there in the cleared space. He looked like he was asleep. At first the dead look like that. Then they stiffen up and look like twisted logs.

I brought my night glasses up and peered through them at the cabin. The dark spaces of the windows mocked my



His eyes were on the storm raging outside, as the quietly moving figure approached . . .

searching glance. Every now and then, fiery streaks, like comets' tails, would spurt out of the black eyes that were the windows. And from the hidden aspens and underbrush in which we were hidden, there would come the answering streaks, death winging on trails of flame.

Clint Brent had to be in there!

The stillness magnified sounds. I could hear a puncher curse softly as he rolled into some burrs. And from the slope to my left, where there were several deputies; the ones the sheriff had told to get as close as they could, there were whispered instructions. These, and the great silence which would descend between the sounds of men bent on death, were the background to the drama.

For in that cabin below were three men against whom all hands were turned. They were guilty of two crimes for which the penalty was death. Cattle-rustling is not a minor crime in the west. They had been caught at it and had fought it out, killing two of those who had caught them. Now they were trapped in a lonely cabin in the foothills of the Lagrossa Range. Well, it would not be long, now.

I swept my glasses across the wide clearing. There at the farthest edge they had tethered their horses. But in order to reach them, they had to run the gauntlet of our guns, ranged in a crossfire to cut off any escape in that direction. And by God, that's what they tried!

We had expected them to make the break from the door. But they came through the single window at the side. One was short and thick, his barrel-body bent low, as though he had in mind to *dodge* the bullets. The second was of average height, bareheaded and bare-chested, running with short, fast steps. And the third was Clint Brent! There was no mistaking the lean tallness of the man, nor the arrogant manner with which he leaped in twisting effortless movement, like a jackrabbit, weaving like a football player.

A hail of bullets crossed the line of their flight. The short one and the one without a shirt fell before they had taken more than ten steps. But Brent seemed to lead a charmed life.

He was twenty yards from the horses, ten, five, one, and with a tremendous leap he was in the saddle. It was then I brought the rifle butt to my shoulder. I knew Brent. He could not do things on a small scale. Magnificence was in his soul. And the manner of the bravado had to be observed even if it meant death. I knew he would turn in the saddle to yell something at those who sought his life!

He had turned, his left hand held high, brandishing the rifle as though it were a club, and I saw his mouth open wide. But my aim was to that space to the right of his bent elbow. The bullet knocked him off the horse. He was dead before he hit the ground, the top of his head sheared off clean by the mushrooming shell.

BIG John Malter stepped out of the room which was his office, and clomped across the room toward me. But I saw only the girl who was at his side.

She was tall, taller than the average woman, cleaner, more beautiful, more desirable than the average, than any! Her plaid-shirt, open at the collar exposed a tan throat and the rising fullness of twin domes of loveliness. Her mouth, full and curving in delicious expectation of a kiss, was parted in a half-smile. And her eyes were bright in excitement. It was she who spoke first.

"Jack! You're back! Did you . . .?"

I shook my head up and down.

"Well, blast them!" Malter boomed. "So they got it, eh? About time that fool sheriff got to them. Guess he'll listen to me next time when I say Jack Levens is the best damned man in these parts . . ."

"Now dad!" her voice chided his outburst.

He turned his head to her, threw an arm thick as an oak limb around her shoulder, and said:

"Guess I can speak my mind, honey. They'd never have caught up with them rascals if Jack hadn't got their trail along the Lagrosso way. 'They'll take the Devil's Road,' fool-sheriff said." His voice sank to a shout, "Well, that's the end of rustling in these parts, now."

I figured it was time to put my modest two cents in.

"Wasn't quite as hard as I thought it might be," I said. "Once I got the idea that Clint Brent was connected with the thing, I sort of had an idea where he'd head for. But that's over with, sir. I've more important things on my mind. So if you don't mind, I'd like to speak with Miss Josie?"

Malter's shallow eyes hid themselves behind their fat lids. His cupid-bow's mouth opened wide in a grin of delight. It was okay with him. He knew what I had in mind to ask his daughter. In fact, he had as much as given his consent before I started off with the sheriff's men.

Josie's china-blue eyes went wide at my words. She also had an idea what I wanted. She lifted a hand to her father's arm, then let it fall as he started back to the office. I waited until the door closed behind him, then took her hand and led her to the wide porch which circled the huge frame house.

There was a cushioned swing close to one of the windows. I sat her in it, sat alongside, and said:

"Josie . . . I ain't much with words. Matter of fact deeds have always counted with me. But this is a matter of words. So give me a little help, honey."

The silver edge of a sickle moon hung just past the eaves and I saw an impish grin light her features. She knew what I was asking. But she wasn't going to help any.

"Why, Jack Lawrence! You, the man who tracked down the famous Brent, asking me, little me for help?"

"Yep," I said. "This is going to take two to make a go. You see, honey, I want to marry you . . ." It was quite simple. The phrase came out just the way I'd planned it. I had practised enough. My voice dropped to just the rightly hesitant tone.

Only the pay-off wasn't quite what I expected. I knew that she was a bit of a flirt. But I'd always thought that in her feelings to me she was sincere. I couldn't figure her sudden reluctance to commit herself. For all of a sudden she had drawn away from my side and was sitting at one end of the swing, her face drawn away from me.

"Why what's wrong?" I asked, my voice sharp and a little high. I changed my tone as she turned in surprise. I had never used that tone of voice with her before. It took her by surprise. And made her angry.

"Is there something wrong?" she asked. And that beautiful mouth was drawn down at the corners. Her eyes reflected their bright anger.

"I—I'm sorry," I said. "Guess I'm a little on edge."

Instantly, she was contrite.

"It's I who should apologize," she said. "You've had a hard time of it these last few days and I snap at you as if . . ."

"I warned you," I said, and this time I knew I had her from the way she slid over toward me. I put my arms around her and continued: "Like I said, I'm no good with words. And maybe there are other ways of proposing. But me, I only know the most direct way."

"And I'll be that way with you," she said. "Give me two weeks. I can't give you my answer right now. Please don't ask me why. I really don't know why."

"Don't you love me?" I asked.

"Maybe that's it."

I cursed this damned business of love

under my breath. Love! Did people have to know love? All I wanted was her. And the four thousand acres and eight thousand head of cattle that went with her. Love! I could get all I wanted from the girls at the Silver Dollar over in Albogardo.

"And maybe I don't know," she went on. "I've never given it much thought. But now I'll have to. And I won't let you wait too long, Jack. I promise."

THE twinkle in Malter's eyes died when he saw the way we came in, me with my mouth hanging full to my chin. And Josie bright-eyed and trembling-lipped. She went straight to her room, ignoring her father's question as to what happened.

"What the devil's the matter with the girl?" he asked from the depths of the huge chair which had been made especially for his great bulk.

"Don't blame her, sir," I said. "I guess I was kind of sudden."

"Sudden! What did she expect, a proposal by correspondence? I courted her mother from the wagon seat while a bunch of hootin' Sioux's were givin' us hell. An' she accepted me then an' there. Guess she didn't know how long we were goin' to be on this earth, from the way those varmints were settin' after us. Times have changed. But I didn't think my daughter . . ." his voice trailed off.

I nodded my head briefly, started for my room and stopped as he bellowed after me:

"Dang nab it, Jack! I want you to know I'm all for you, boy."

I smiled my thanks and closed the door on his beet-red face.

Well, I thought to myself, as I started to undress, it took a woman to change your plans. And here I thought the whole thing was in the bag. And a nice bag too. The idea had come to me when I had delivered the last load of steers to Albogardo. There were a couple of independents in the Silver Dollar and they were waving fat bundles of greenbacks around, offering eight dollars a hundred over the ceiling. I knew that Malter hated their guts. He'd said as much. But that was a lot of dough. Maybe I would have forgotten the whole thing if Clint Brent hadn't walked in just then.

Clint was a gambler. That was about all anyone knew of him. He was a big guy, big talk, and big act. There were a couple of things we'd done in common. He came over to the table and grinned that big grin of his down at me.

"How's the fat man?" he asked. "Still paying peanuts?"

I nodded, saying nothing. I knew he had something on his mind and when the time would come he'd get it off his chest.

"Still pussy-footin' around that gal of his?" he went on. "You're a sucker, Jack. Even if you make the grade, how you gonna keep her. Malter's as tight with dough as an Indian's with talk."

"So?" I said.

He sat down then.

"See those guys?" he said, pointing to the three independents. "They're paying heavy money for cattle. And not asking questions, either. So I'll give it to you fast. You've got about three thousand head over on the west range. I can have four boys over at the gap, you know the one I mean, near the mesa, and say Thursday just before it gets dark why we can sort of cut out a few hundred head."

"Too many," I said.

"Okay. A hundred, then."

"That's better. Then another day, another hundred. We split fifty-fifty."

All he said to that was, "Right."

In three weeks, Malter was short better than a thousand head. So a lone-some cow-poke moseying along where he had no business gets his nose where it don't belong and spots Brent and his men. My luck, or rather Brent's, his men miss and the puncher hot-foots it to the ranch with the news. So it's round-up time early and the phone rings at the sheriff's office in Albogardo. And that's where I came in.

Brent had a rendezvous cabin where we'd split. I was the only outsider who knew of it. I knew, also, that if he got caught, I'd get it too. And when they fought it out with some deputies and killed two, I knew that I was an accessory after the fact, because I knew where they'd head for. So I beat my gums to the boss and led our sheriff straight to their hide-out.

But before I rode off, I told Malter that if I came back I was going to ask for his daughter's hand. And he said, okay. He had nothing to lose. She had to say yes, first. But now I was a hero, and would make the kind of son-in-law he could brag about. So the rustling I'd done was in vain. Of course I had the money all laid nicely away.

I smiled to myself in the darkness. No matter which way the wind blew, I was top-dog. But I was pretty sure Josie'd say yes. I winked at the moon and the moon winked back. The second wink put me to sleep.

MALTER had to go to town the next morning. I knew that. And I also knew that Josie took her morning ride with him. She was going to have me for a companion this morning. Only I was wrong. The station-wagon was sitting in the gravel roadway in front of the house. Josie was sitting behind the wheel. I wondered why I hadn't seen her at breakfast. Now I knew. She was also going to town.

"Jack," she called me as I came out on the porch.

I walked over and draped my arms across the sill of the door.

"Come along with me," she said. "I've got to pick up a guest at the station."

This was more like it. The station was in Albogardo. Then I thought of her father.

"Oh he decided not to go," she said in explanation. "He's getting too lazy . . . and too fat. I ribbed him this morning by telling him a younger thinner man ought to take over."

"And what did he say to that?" I asked.

"That you were thinner than he."

I smiled at that, opened the door and got behind the wheel. It was forty miles to Albogardo. A lot of talk, the right kind, could be gotten in in that stretch.

"What's it all about?" I asked as we made the turn into the highway.

"A guest," she said again. "You know how dad is when he meets people. Seems like he met a man last time he was out in Chicago and of course invited him or his son, I don't really know which, down here for a few weeks. Anyway, we got a wire yesterday from the son accepting the invitation. So little Josie's off in the wagon to pick up the prodigal son."

There was a few miles of silence between us after we'd torn Easterners to pieces, a usual thing with Westerners. Then I popped:

"Been thinking it over, Josie?"

"You mean last night?"

I caught her eye in the mirror and shook my head.

"I told you last night," she said, "that when I make my mind up I'll let you know."

I let it drop.

* * *

THERE were only three people on the platform and I eliminated two of them. They were both women. I looked sharply at the third. He was dressed in a tan-colored suit, bareheaded, and at his feet three grips were piled. He was a tall man, maybe an inch shorter than myself, but heavier, with the kind of weight athletes carry, in the shoulders and thighs. I whipped the wagon around the drive and parked it almost in his lap. He smiled through the cloud of dust and I noticed that he had nice teeth. Then he was striding toward us.

I got out and waited for him. Josie had told me his name was Whitford Ryan.

"Mister Ryan?" I asked.

He wasn't looking at me at all. He had brown eyes which crinkled at the corner and I knew instinctively that the women thought he was quite a man.

"Miss Malter," he said passing me and moving around to her side. "I'm Whit Ryan."

I wanted to say, "So what?" Instead, I got behind the wheel again.

Josie introduced us and I found he had a strong hand-clasp. He also had a set of perfect teeth. Mister Ryan monopolized the conversation all the way into the ranch. I had to admit he was interesting. If only Josie had found him less so.

Something odd about him struck me. I kept looking at him in the mirror as he talked and I noticed that although he smiled a lot it was mostly with his mouth. We were almost at the ranch when he began asking me questions.

"How big was the ranch? . . . How many head of cattle? . . . What are the prices? . . . How is the buying situation?"

It turned out that his father was a big independent and that the meat situation in Chicago was not too good. A lot of black market and wildcat buying. He was out here for more than pleasure. I got the impression that Mister Ryan wanted some of Malter's cattle. What was more, I got the idea that although he was talking to Josie, he was aiming his remarks to me.

I wasn't sure about anything until a week later.

During that week Ryan was a busy character. He had brought a lot of fancy dude clothes with him and he and Josie saw a lot of each other. All I saw was a lot of red. It wasn't just jealousy. But she was interested in him. A blind man could have seen that. She hung around him like a bear around a honey stump.

THEN one morning Josie and her father went to Albogardo. I had something to look after on the west range. Ryan asked if he could ride along with me.

We'd been trotting along a spell when Ryan reined his horse in close and said:

"You don't like me, do you Lawrence?"

I said, "Not particularly."

"Maybe you'll like me better after I have my say."

"Maybe."

He turned a bit peevish. "Don't play strong, silent man with me. I know what's eating you. Josie. Well, you don't have to worry about her. I'm not interested. Matter of fact I'm engaged to a girl back in Chi . . ."

My pot of anger boiled over. This good-looking jerk wasn't interested in Josie but I was. And damn it, he was making her forget me.

"To hell with you and your girl!" I said. "I don't know what your game is, mister, but I don't like it."

"Fair enough," he said, and I noticed that he wasn't afraid of me. The smile broadened in fact. "But after I say what I want maybe you'll change your mind. Now just listen!" he broke in on me before I could say anything. "I've been noseying around and I've found out things. For example, Malter doesn't pay too well. You make eighty and found, not a lot for a range boss. You want to marry Josie. Brother, she's a good kid, and you've got my blessings. Satisfied?"

I kept shut.

"All I'm interested in is cattle," he went on.

I just looked at him but he must have seen that I, too, was interested. He pulled his horse up short, his smile went away and a look of concentration came into his eyes.

"Get this," he said. "Malter bought six hundred head yesterday. I know. I was with him. He told me he was turning them loose to feed. On the west range. There are already some nine hundred head there. That's an awful lot of cattle. I know a place where they'd bring thirty dollars a hundred."

I couldn't help but whistle. Those steers would weigh in at twelve hundred on the average.

"I know someone," Ryan went on, "who would give you a thousand dollars for every hundred that came his way."

I figured quick. Brent and I had gotten twenty six dollars. And Brent had done all the work. If this guy was offering thirty dollars, then someone else would offer more. And I knew the very ones. So why play with Ryan, I thought? Besides, I would only be getting part of the deal. I'd be a sucker to play that way.

"Y'know," I said, "I've got a good mind to go to the boss and tell him what you're trying to cook up. But I'm not built that way. I'm not forgetting, Ryan, and I'm not talking. But from now on, stay away from Josie. Because one of these fine nights I'm going to take you apart."

He had a funny look in his eye as he reined the horse around and kicked it in the belly.

MALTER was back when we arrived back at the ranch. I went right in to see him.

"Mind if I took the rest of the day off, boss?" I asked.

I was surprised, in a way, to hear Malter say yes without arguing. He didn't like for his help to take time off during a working day. At any rate he said yes and I took the station wagon to town. It was almost dark when I arrived and the Silver Dollar was just getting into high gear.

We were a little off the beaten track for the tourist trade but there were a few who took the chance of county roads just to see the town. Most of them came to the Silver Dollar, sooner or later.

I stood at the bar, had a few shots, and looked around to see if the party I wanted was in the place. Brent and his men had all been killed. No one but myself knew of this man's connection with the rustlers. He wouldn't have known of me had it not been for one night when I was in on a pay-off. I caught his eye; he was sitting in a corner by himself, dealing Canfield, and turned away. But I kept my glance in the mirror over the bar and in a few seconds I saw him look toward me. His left eye closed in a slow wink and I turned and started to walk away. I walked in a round-about manner so that I had to pass his table and as I reached it he looked away from the cards, his lips parting in a friendly grin.

"Well, if it isn't Jack Lawrence," he said. "Long time no see. How you been, fella?"

I said, "Okay. And you?"

"Fine. Sit down, man, and have a

drink. Unless you're in a hurry, of coure?"

I sat down and after a girl had brought us a drink we got down to cases. I opened up:

"I was offered thirty dollars a hundred. Can you beat it?"

"That's about tops," he said reflectively. "But I guess I can by a couple of bucks. Only get this. Got to be prime steers. And no less than five hundred."

"Okay," I said.

I THOUGHT, Sure. Why not? Brent had only been able to get away with four hundred head before he was spotted. My end had been close to five thousand. Not bad, but not too good for the risks of the game. Damn the girl! I could find as nice anywhere with the money I'd have. Besides, it was cash in hand. I wouldn't have to wait for the old man to kick off.

"How'll you do it?" he asked.

"With your help," I said, giving it to him cold. "Brent had men working with him. He paid them. You'll have to get some boys and pay them. I want my end clean, get it?"

He shook his head okay.

I went on: "I can cut out about three hundred Tuesday when I get out to the west range again. I'll be there alone. Now here's what you or whoever's going to do it will have to do. The west range ends against the face of a mesa. But there's a path to the top along a shallow gully. Two miles east of our boundary is a county road. Brent used to make the deliveries on that road. It's deserted at night because it leads only to the old Gordon place. Now . . ."

He broke in: "Then it's the same place where we did business before. I know what to do from there on. You see, I own that place. That's where the meat is cut up and shipped. I've got five double-trailers hauling for me, Lawrence."

This guy wasn't a small-timer. Those big trucks can haul a hell of a lot of beef. And who would ever thing of looking into that old rambling wreck of a place?

"Then I'll see you Tuesday night," I said, getting up.

He shook his head in agreement and I started off. But only for a few steps. For there at the bar was Ryan. His back was toward me and he was looking down at his drink. I hesitated, wondering whether or not to approach him. I was certain that he hadn't seen me. Then I got an idea. He had mentioned several times that he had wanted to get in on a round-up. It was a little too early for it was the reason I gave him for saying, no. It was, too. But . . .

I tapped him on the shoulder. He turned, gave me a look of, what the hell are you doing here, and asked:

"Ah. The strong, silent man. What can I do for you?"

"Why didn't you let me know you wanted to go to town?" I asked. "I could have driven you."

"That'd have been nice, now," he said. "But I thought I'd try a day without your company. It worked out pretty well. That is up to now."

I felt my face tighten in anger. But I swallowed it. For sure I wanted him on that Tuesday night round-up.

"Okay. So you don't like me," I said. "The feeling's mutual. But you asked me one day last week about riding on a round-up. Still want to?"

He brightened at that.

"Sure. When?"

"Look. I'm not supposed to take dudes on night stuff. So keep your trap shut and you can go along Tuesday. Unless you're scared?"

"I'll be there."

THERE was thunder over the mesa. I saw a jagged strip of lightning flash across the sky. Behind it the dark banks of clouds showed threateningly. Our horses jogged along easily. We were both silent.

Ryan didn't know it, but this was to be his last night on the range, his last night anywhere. For I had decided to kill him. I hadn't thought about his being other than a party to rustling. That was the reason I asked him along. So that later I could tell him what happened. Now I realized that the coincidence of my being on the scene might lead to questions in the minds of Malter and others.

Ryan had to die. That's why I had a .45 slung in a holster on my hip.

Getting away had been easier than I thought. The first sign of the storm and Malter had sent for me. He was worried about his cattle on the west range. There had been a small hitch when he wanted to send some punchers with me. But I was able to talk him out of it. Instead I told him that the men were needed more on the other range. It was later than I wanted it to be when I started out, however, because Ryan was slow in getting going. I saw eight men go out while I was waiting. I wonder why Malter had sent so many men. Then Ryan showed up and I could only think of how I was going to get rid of him.

Ryan broke into my silence:

"A hell of a night for this, isn't it?"

"Yeah. If the storm breaks we've got our job cut out for us," I said. "But there's a protected spot along the wall of the mesa. That's why I didn't ask for a lot of men. The two of us can drive the cattle in."

Then we saw the mass of steers, a huge circle of milling animals, bellowing their fear of the coming storm.

I gave Ryan his instructions:

"We ride side by side along the flank. Drive them to the right. And if more than one steer decides to head in any other direction, head them off. Just yell and wave your hat, they'll run."

I didn't go into further details, but set the spurs into my horse. Ryan was close to my side as we set off at top-speed.

We set the tail-end ones into motion and in a few seconds the whole herd was moving in the direction I wanted. Every now and then I glanced toward the mesa top to see whether we could beat the storm. It would be close. Thunder was beginning to roll in continuous drum beats. And the lightning was coming closer. But the herd was moving.

I spurred my horse past Ryan and took the lead shouting and waving my hat, driving the animals toward the gully before the rain hit. Once they were in the gully, they had only one direction in which to move, toward the county road. It wouldn't be long before the rustlers showed. Then I saw the black-top surface of the road, in a flash of lightning. I turned and for a bare second caught a glimpse of Ryan's face. It was set in tense lines, his eyes squinting until they almost closed. He was looking at me.

I didn't see the other horsemen until the next flash of lightning.

There were eight of them, spread across the highway. Too late I saw the trap. For already the men who were to meet me had made their rendezvous. Four of them, riding among the steers, cutting out a whole section of steers. I yelled, screamed, but my voice was drowned in the tumult of racing animals. Then I turned for a second look toward Ryan. And I knew that a trap had been laid for me. Malter hadn't sent the men to the other range. They had used the short-cut to the road and had come up it. My little dream boat was being sunk before my eyes. Rage burned a hole in my breast.

I whipped the .45 from its resting place and whirled in the saddle, and sent a single shot toward Ryan. Instinctively, I knew he was the one responsible for what was happening.

I missed him. And the next flame from the heavens showed me that he, too, had a gun.

I had to get out of there.

My mind was working with the speed of light. I knew the ground here like an open book. In darkness or light I knew every path. I raced my horse for a clump of trees to my right about a hundred yards. Behind me came the drumming hoofbeats of Ryan's animal. I whipped my horse into the faint path which led around the grove. The path led upward in a slow spiral. But before it ended on the rim of the mesa there was a cut-off, a narrow path, room enough only for a single horse, and it led down toward the flatland. Below me I heard a single burst of gunfire. The trap had been sprung.

I would have made good my escape, if the lightning hadn't betrayed me. My horse was faster, and I knew better. Ryan would have continued up the spiraling path. But the lightning betrayed me. There was a single section of the spiral from which he could have seen me. And just as he reached it the heavens opened with brilliant flame. I had a good five hundred yard start, though.

I don't know how long we raced. I only know that I held the lead.

THERE was an old cabin which was my goal. Once somebody had thought to homestead there. Something had happened and now it stood empty. It was far from the beaten path and I had found it only by chance. There was a huge mountain oak which screened it from above the only way to approach it. In order to get to it, a man had to set his animal sliding down the almost vertical wall for a good ten yards.

Once again the lightning flashed. I saw the oak to my right. Whirling my horse with a suddenness which almost unseated me, I set him sliding down the almost sheer decline. And one of those twists of fate played me for a fool.

If I had slowed the horse down and let him pick his way downward I would have been better off. But by my fast work on the reins, I made him lose his head. He stumbled for a second. There was no way to recover. I leaped from his back just in time. He was dead when we arrived at the bottom.

The shack was a hundred yards away. Even if Ryan saw what happened, I could beat him to the shack. And once there I could pick him off at my leisure. There was only one path which led to it. For the rear of the shack was perched on a precipice.

I got to it an instant before the deluge of rain broke.

The darkness was intense. Now and then a vivid flash of purple split the sky and simultaneously a rolling cascade of thunder deafened me. The rain fell in a silver curtain, shielding the man whom I knew was out there somewhere. I could only crouch by the window at the front of the house, my gun gripped tightly in my fingers and wait his coming.

I don't know what made me turn at that instant. But I did. Not in time to stop him but in time at least to see him.

My shot went wild and Ryan was on me.

His right hand clamped down on my wrist and his fingers twisted strainingly against the flesh. I clubbed down at his exposed face with my free hand. He grunted each time I struck. But his hand refused to release its grip. I started to crawl toward the door, dragging him along.

Suddenly his fingers went limp and with a movement faster than I could stop, he was on his feet. I saw the grin on his face as he dove at me, football fashion. But we weren't playing football. I was fighting for my life. My roweled heels sank deep in his belly. As he went backward I got to my feet. But he was like greased lightning. Only this time we were face to face. And this kind of fighting was my dish.

I drove my knee into his groin, and clubbed down at his head with the gun barrel. Somehow he managed to roll from the blow. The gun caught his shoulder. What was worse, my hands and fingers were clammy with sweat and the shock was too much for my fingers. They released their grip on the gun and it flew out of my hands. I didn't care. He was going to die anyway, if I had to strangle him.

He staggered away from me and I leaped in close, ready for the kill.

A million pinwheels of light went off in my skull. A dozen hammers beat against my face. I lowered my head against my chest trying to avoid his fists. I had made the mistake of coming in to him. He fought like a boxer, and hit like a mule. There was dynamite and sleep in those fists. His right caught me and I staggered back against the wall of the shack, shaking it to its foundations.

I let my knees sag and he charged me. His fingers were outstretched for my throat. But they never got there. My booted foot came up into his gut and as he gasped and bent low with shock and pain, I hit him in the back of the neck as hard as I could.

He sank to the floor, face down.

I staggered as I went for the .45. When I got it, I came back to him, rolled him over with my foot, kneeled at his side and waited for him to open his eyes.

"So I walked right into the little trap, like a kid," I said when I saw his eyelids flutter and I knew he could hear me.

They opened wide and he stared at me. His mouth was closed in a thin line and from one corner a slow stream of blood dribbled.

I slapped him, not hard, with the gun. His head rocked from the blow. But it opened his mouth.

"Sure, Lawrence," he said thinly. "You walked right into it. And you haven't got a dog's chance. Even if you get out of here. So . . ."

"So I ought to give up, is that it? You ought to know better," I said. "But I am dumb. I should have known that Malter was suspicious. Only I knew of that gap in the west range. He just led me a fool's dance with that talk about marrying his daughter. I just want to know one thing, where do you come in?"

"I'm a government man," Ryan said slowly. "Malter asked for an agent to come out. After all, those cattle were never found . . ."

I hit him then, hard. I hit him. Again and again until his face was just a bloody pulp, until his brains oozed out of the battered skull. Then I got up and walked out of the cabin into the driving rain.

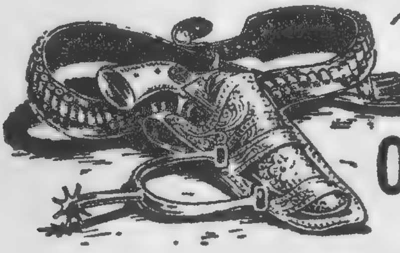
I walked blindly into the rain.

Suddenly the rain stopped. I looked around and saw that I was under the spreading branches of a huge oak. Lightning flared and I saw the whole of the valley and mesa spread out before me. And in all that land there was no place to which I could go.

I felt my mouth strain in a wild grin. And from deep within me laughter bubbled out. I had played a game with myself, and had thought I could win. But I hadn't. I had lost. I lifted my face to the roaring sky.

There was a searing blast of flame which came down straight from the heavens toward me. For the barest part of an instant, for the smallest part of eternity I knew a last thing, that lightning had struck the tree I was under. Then I knew nothing.

THE END



Vignettes OF FAMOUS WESTERNERS

By GALE STEVENS

JOHN BROWN

IN THE MIDDLE of the nineteenth century, Kansas was a state torn between two violently different ideas. One of those states which lay between the North and the South, her populace was almost evenly divided in their sentiment for and against the institution of slavery. Rabble-rousers from both the North and South assembled there and attempted, by fair means or foul, to win people over to their side. There, right and wrong fought their battle with furious bitterness. Into this tangle of motives and passions walked tall, red-haired John Brown. He was as complex a puzzle as Kansas, and to this day people are not agreed as to whether he was a sinner or saint. His was perhaps the most outstanding example of the intensity of fanatical enthusiasm.

Brown was born in Connecticut in 1800. His parents were of English and Dutch stock. The youth grew up with the Bible in one hand and the plow in the other. Only the fact that he had very weak eyes prevented John Brown from studying for the ministry. Marrying while yet a boy, John tried to earn a living as a wool-grower, farmer, tanner, and surveyor, in different sections of the country taking his wife and large family with him. Always in financial difficulties, it soon became obvious that Brown did not have a business mind. He often worked with borrowed capital losing money which did not belong to him.

John Brown brooded on the sin of Negro slavery. Just when he became devoted to the cause of abolition cannot be definitely settled. At John Brown's command his sons emigrated to Kansas in 1854, to aid in bringing that territory into the Union as a Free Soil state. He had made unfaltering converts of his children, and when they grew up and married, of their wives and husbands. The whole family felt themselves dedicated to a sacred cause.

John Brown soon followed his sons to Kansas. He had heard of the violence and the aggression of the pro-slavery men, who were thronging into the territory from Missouri and other slave states. Brown played a leading part in the bitterly contested elections and bloody fights which raged during that period of controversy. Swept into a blind frenzy, he and a party of his followers in May, 1856, took by night five pro-slavery men, supposedly of bad character, and murdered them in cold blood. Brown's admirers declare that it saved Kansas for the abolitionists. Some historians claim that this brutal deed did more harm than good.

In the summer of 1858, Brown with a band of men to aid him crossed the border into Missouri, captured some slaves, and journeyed with them into Canada where they achieved their freedom. When the Kansas question was settled in favor of freedom, Brown formed a mad scheme for making war upon slavery in the South itself. He made a brief trip to Europe to study battle technics and battlefields in an effort to increase his military knowledge. The contrast of peaceful and violent elements in Brown's nature now made themselves more evident than ever before. The man laid cold and deliberate plans to wipe out the "enemies of freedom" on the field of battle. His natural religious leanings toward pacifism and temperance changed into an uncontrollable fury.

Yet while the seeds for war were being laid in his seething brain, he looked ahead into the future when the violence would cease. Brown devised an elaborate Provisional Constitution which was to be used in the governing of the nation within a nation that was to be established by the gradual freeing of the Southern slaves. But Brown never found the opportunity to put the document into use. One of the men in his ranks deserted with valuable information. The only recourse Brown had was to defer action and remain secretly hidden from the Southern aristocrats.

The summer of 1859 found Brown and his small band of followers settled on a rented farm at Hagerstown in Maryland, about five miles from Harper's Ferry. The group consisted of twenty hardy, vigorous young fellows who possessed, above all, a horror of slavery. Each worshiped his leader and was willing to lay down his life for him. They knew Brown hoped to gather a nucleus of slaves and whites who could work together toward the liberation of every Southern Negro.

The twenty men stayed at the farm until the middle of October, slowly accumulating arms and supplies while keeping themselves hidden from the neighbors' prying eyes. On the night of October 16th Brown marched out at the head of his petty band of adventurers and attacked the little town of Harper's Ferry. His purpose was to seize the United States arsenal there and procure arms for a slave uprising.

This sudden outbreak of violence alarmed the entire country. It did not take long for news of that sort to spread. Men had been killed on both sides. John Brown, after getting possession of a few of the government buildings and picking up from the surrounding country a number of slaves and also a number of slaveholders as hostages, was forced to take refuge in the engine-house and remain there until Tuesday morning. With him was the battered remnants of his band of followers and his prisoners.

In the dull gray October dawn a detachment of United States Marines, under Robert E. Lee, advanced upon them. In the clamor of arms the doors were broken in, the building was entered and more of the men at Brown's side fell. Of the twenty-two men who participated in his raid, ten were killed, seven taken prisoners, and five escaped. Two of the men killed were Brown's own sons, and he himself was seriously wounded.

While Brown was in prison, curious men attempted to study his character. All who questioned him were impressed by the man's composure and clear-headedness. At first he was surrounded by bitter enemies. But they grew to respect him. Even the Southerners who condemned his cause were taken aback by his spirit of sacrifice and his singleness of purpose.

As soon as his wound permitted, he was tried for "treason, and conspiring with slaves and other rebels, and murder in the first degree." Brown bore himself through it all with the same dignity he had shown from the first moment of his capture. Convicted, he was condemned to hang on December 2nd. During his long imprisonment, John Brown corresponded widely, never giving up the cause for which he was losing his life. He discouraged all attempts at escape telling his friends that as a martyr to the cause of freedom he would serve it more substantially than by any further living effort.

On the second day of December in 1859, John Brown was hanged at Charleston, Virginia. The aura of simplicity, grandeur, and purity, still was there until his last moment of life. On his last trip as he was driven to the gallows he said: "This is a beautiful country. I never had the pleasure of seeing it before."

So died John Brown, a man absolutely convinced of the truth and justice of his own ideas of right and wrong, a man determined to impose them upon the world by verbal persuasion, if not by bloodshed, agony, and slaughter. Idealist, or fanatic, he was impelled by an idea bigger than himself. In the cause of freedom he became narrow and stubborn, intolerant and brutal to the men who opposed him. Whether his position was justified or not is undisputed. The Civil War was fought for the cause he believed in. Within two years his tragic end took on a historical significance when the Union armies marched into battle singing—

"John Brown's body lies a-mouldering in the grave,
But his soul goes marching on."

THE END

THE LAND OF KUI

By Richard S. Shaver

A tremendous tale of a lost continent in the Pacific which was the victim of its own scientists who utilized an atomic power to destroy themselves.

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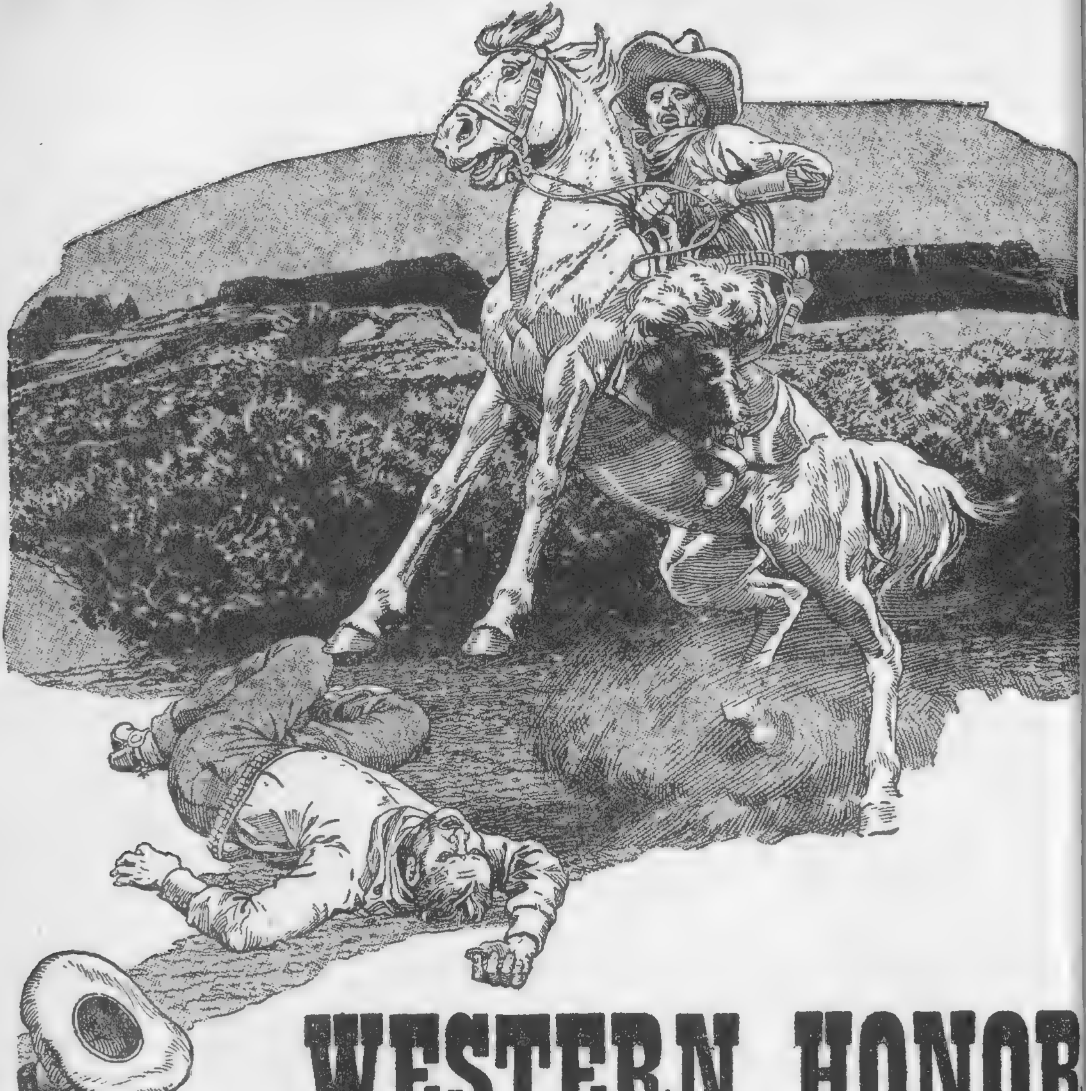
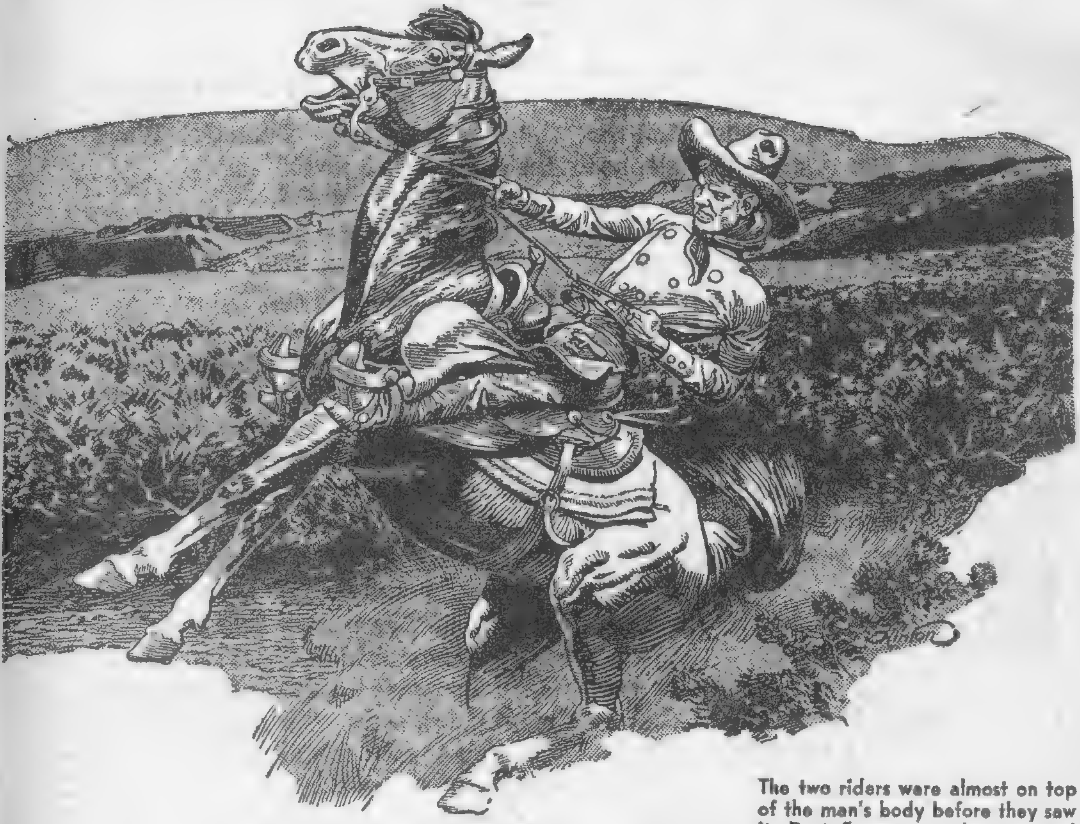


WESTERN HONOR

by Alexander Blade

Donna Ross was frightened, and Will Morrow knew it was a question of honor that worried her. But his code was upheld with a sixshooter.



The two riders were almost on top of the man's body before they saw it. Dust flew up as they swerved

"WILL!" the girl's voice called. "Will! Come here quickly please."

The voice came from inside the depot of the railroad station at Burnstone, Arizona. Will Morrow swung hastily from his tired horse at the sound. He knew that voice, he would know it anywhere on earth at any time of the day or night. Although he had never admitted it, even to himself—a man with his background and personality does not admit such things—every time he heard this voice his heart seemed to beat faster.

"Will—"

"I'm coming, Donna. What is it?"

She was inside the depot. He couldn't see her, but he could hear the fear in her voice, the sudden, sharp, inexplicable fear of a woman who has come unexpectedly upon trouble. Except for five years when he had been away, Morrow had known Donna Ross most of her life. He had never known a time when she seemed afraid of anything. Her father had been a prospector, a miner, and she had followed him almost from the time she was able to walk. She had known the rough life of the mining camps, the dangers of the trail, the winter blizzards in the mountains, the summer sun in the desert, but she had never known, or had never shown she had known, the meaning of fear.

She was afraid now. The fear was in her voice. Morrow jerked free the gun holstered at his hip. His high heeled boots clumped on the wooden boards of the depot platform as he raced for the open door of the station. He did not know what he expected to find inside the railroad station but if it was something big enough to frighten Donna Ross, Morrow grimly suspected he would need the gun. He stepped through the door.

Donna Ross was standing at the counter in front of the grill where the station agent transacted the railroad's business. Ed Carter, the agent, was standing beside her. Sam Ormsby, a newcomer whose business was mining claims, stood at the far end of the counter. Brown wrapping paper from a half-opened package was lying on the counter in front of the grill. Morrow caught a glint of yellow hidden behind the brown paper.

"What's going on here?" he asked. "Ormsby? Carter—"

Ormsby's face was blue with suppressed anger. Carter looked shaken. Donna Ross' face was paper white.

"Will," she whispered. "Will—look—" She pointed to the partly unwrapped package lying on the counter.

THE package was about eight inches long and six inches wide by six inches thick. It wasn't very big. It would slip inside the smallest suitcase. It would go into a saddle bag but it wouldn't go into a coat pocket.

The size of the package did not make it important. The contents were the important thing.

Two stacks of yellow bills six inches thick made up the contents of this package.

Morrow looked at it. And looked again. He slipped the gun back into its holster.

"It's money," he said. "Somebody shipped money into town. What is it, the payroll for the Lucky Dick mines?"

"No," Donna answered.

"Somebody buy a ranch and ship the money here to pay for it?"

"No!"

"Somebody buy a mine?"

"No. Will—"

"What's wrong, Donna? What's the matter with you?"

"The money, Will."

"What about the money?"

"It came to me, Will. The money came by express, *to me!*"

"What?"

"It came to me, Will, it came to me."

Morrow's eyes went to Ed Carter, the station agent. Carter swallowed, then nodded. "That's right, Will. The package came in on number 4, early this morning. It was addressed to her. When I saw her on the way to the restaurant, I called her over and she opened it. The money was in it."

Morrow looked at Ormsby. "Somebody has made a mistake," the mining man said sullenly. "Somebody sent her the package by mistake. I came into the depot to see if there was anything for me just as she was opening the package. Her name is on the bill of lading."

Will Morrow pushed his hat back on his head. He was beginning to feel a little shaky inside. He had come into the depot expecting danger of some kind. There was no danger. There were two stacks of yellow bills, two somewhat startled men, and a very frightened girl.

It was Donna's fear that was making him shaky. Why was she so afraid? Why were her eyes so full of fear? Why did she keep looking at him as if she was begging him to believe something?

"It's nice to get money," Morrow said. "Congratulations, Donna. Who sent it to you?"

Her voice was still a whisper. "I didn't know, Will. I don't know who sent it."

"You—you don't know who sent it?"

"No, Will. There's no name on the bill of lading, there's nothing to say who sent it. It just came, that's all."

WILL MORROW let this amazing series of facts filter slowly into his mind. He didn't try to grasp the whole situation at once. He took it a fact at a time. It was safer that way, easier to grasp. First, somebody had sent Donna Ross a package containing two stacks of yellow bills. He didn't know how much money there was in the package but probably there was several thousand dollars. The first question was, Who had sent it to her?

Morrow knew Donna Ross, had known her most of his life. Her parents were dead. She had no known relatives. She owned and ran a small restaurant in Burnstown. Morrow knew all about the restaurant. He ate there every day. Donna was making money in the restaurant, a little money. She had saved a few hundred dollars above expenses. This was all she had on earth. No rich but eccentric relative could have sent her the money. She had no relatives, rich or poor. Then who had sent it?

"I don't know, Will," Donna Ross whispered. "I haven't the faintest idea."

Will Morrow believed her. No matter what she told him, he would believe it.

"This takes some thinking about," he said slowly. In the back of his mind a thought was turning over. It was a thought he did not like. Donna spoke again.

"Will, this has to be cleared up," she said.

"I agree with you, Donna. But probably somebody made a mistake somewhere. Maybe they got the shipping tags mixed. Maybe the package that was supposed to come to you went to somebody else and the package of money you got was supposed to go to another party."

He nodded at the thought. That was it. A mistake had been made. Shipping tags had been mixed. That was all there was to it. "Somebody will turn up and claim the money," he suggested.

He wondered why this thought made him feel so much better.

"I hope so," the girl said. The desperate look on her face revealed that this hope was really a prayer.

"That's the way it will work out," Will Morrow continued. "You can bet that anybody who sends money by express will keep a good look out for it."

He walked over to the counter, examined the rough paper in which the money had been wrapped, looked at the bill of lading, handled the bills.

The money was slightly damp. There were traces of mold on it. The bills were limp and slick in his fingers.

"I noticed that too," Ed Carter said. "Looks like it might have been buried for a spell."

"That's hardly possible," Morrow answered. "Probably the baggage car leaked."

"Might have been," the station agent shrugged.

"Was the package registered?" Morrow asked.

"Nope," Carter answered. "The bill of lading doesn't even have the address or the name of the sender, either."

"Well, somebody will come and claim it," Morrow answered.

Carter shrugged again. "There's somebody coming," he said. The clop, clop of trotting horses sounded in the street outside. Two cowboys rode up, dismounted.

"They're coming in the depot," Carter said, peering through the window.

"So what?" Morrow asked.

"So nothing," the agent shrugged. "The nine forty train is due in a few minutes," he irrelevantly added.

"What difference does that make?" Morrow asked.

"No difference," the agent answered.

"Except there will be a lot of people down to see the train go through," Ormsby spoke. He had remained by the counter. The look of suppressed anger on his face had been replaced by a thoughtful expression.

"People always come down to see the train go through," Morrow pointed out. The cowboys were tying their horses to the hitching rack outside the station.

"What they mean, Will—" Donna Ross began.

"I know what they mean," Will Morrow answered. "They mean for you to get that money out of sight before somebody sees it. Isn't that what you mean?"

HE SWUNG to face the station agent and the mining man. Before the hot anger in his eyes, Ed Carter dropped his gaze. "Don't go on the prod, Will. I'm just trying to be helpful. I'm not saying anything. If Miss Donna wants to wrap up the money and say nothing, I'm sure neither Ormsby nor I will ever say anything about it. Isn't that right, Ormsby?"

It was said of Sam Ormsby that he could smell money. The fact that he had entered the depot as Donna was opening the package of bills seemed to prove the story that Ormsby's long nose was always wiggling in the wind when there was a stray dollar within miles. He nodded in agreement. His head moved with reluctance but it moved.

"I guess that's what we meant, Morrow. But we don't mean to give any offense."

These two men were trying to help him, Morrow realized. They were being friendly, they were being nice, they were being kind. They were giving him a chance. He knew what was in their minds, he knew the terrible threat the package of money was to him. Only four of them knew about the money. If Ormsby and Carter were willing to keep quiet, certainly Will Morrow and Donna Ross ought to be willing to say nothing.

All I have to do is nod—Morrow thought. *Just nod. Donna will wrap up the bills and—Just nod.*

Will Morrow shook his head. "Thank you, gentlemen," he said. "I really thank you for your kind intentions. But I have nothing to conceal, nothing to hide, nothing I don't want known. These people in Burnstown are my friends. They believe in me. I believe in them. So far as I'm concerned, Donna has no reason to conceal this money. I'm glad to be able to say that. Don't you agree, Donna?"

The boots of the cowboys were clumping on the board walk outside the depot. Far off in the distance, miles away as yet but coming closer, a train was whistling. Already a stir and a bustle was audible in the street as the inhabitants of this little Arizona town bustled down to the station to see the morning train puff into town.

The eyes of Donna Ross were suddenly as bright as stars. "I certainly agree, Will. I certainly agree."

The lights in her eyes shook Will Morrow. Donna Ross was crying. The tears were from relief, from happiness.

"Some of us are your friends, Will," Ed Carter spoke. "Remember, I tried to tell you."

He shoved the latch aside on the partition separating his office from the rest of the depot, went behind the grilled window. The two cowboys came into the station.

Will Morrow faced them. He knew both of them. "Hi, Red. Hi, Jack," he said.

"Hi, Will. Hello, Miss Donna." Their broad hats came off at the sight of the girl.

Then they saw the stacks of bills on the counter.

Will Morrow steeled himself to wait.

CHAPTER II

FOR the first time since the railroad started running through Burnstone, there was no one standing around outside the depot to watch the nine forty train from the east come grinding to a halt. The arrival of this train was an important event and every person who could find any excuse to be at the station was always on hand to see who got on and who got off. Today there was no one in sight.

They were all inside the depot where something more startling than a railroad train was on display. Every eye was fastened on the two stacks of yellow bills on the counter. There was $7,800.00 in those two stacks of bills. Ed Carter and Sam Ormsby had counted them and announced the result to the crowd.

Will Morrow was standing with his back against the wall. No one was paying any attention to him. They were looking at the money and at Donna Ross.

"I don't know who sent me this money or why," Donna was saying. "It isn't my money, I know. I want to announce to everyone present that I am holding it only until the rightful owner comes forward and claims it. If anyone here knows the name of the owner or anything else about the money, I will be glad to listen to what you have to say."

A buzz ran through the crowd when she finished speaking. No one claimed the money. No one could suggest who the real owner might be. Will Morrow kept his back stiff against the wall and listened to the whispers going through the crowd.

"Donna Ross got all that money in an express package!" a woman whispered.

"I never heard of such a thing," a second woman answered. "Who ever do you suppose could have sent it to her?"

"That's what I'd like to know, dearie. That's what I'd like to know."

"Seems mighty funny to me."

"Don't it though."

The little depot was filled with the buzz of voices. The whispers to which Morrow was listening were a shrill undertone to the buzz of conversation. He didn't want to listen to those whispers but he didn't dare walk out of the depot where he couldn't hear them.

"—Says she don't know who sent it."

"That's what *she* says!"

"Now Matilda," a man's voice urged. "Remember we've known Donna a long time and she's always been straight as a string. You can't go saying bad things about her unless you've got proof."

"What more proof would you want than all that money?"

"—Something wrong somewhere," another voice said. "Something mighty wrong."

MORROW kept quiet. Everyone was looking at Donna and at the yellow bills displayed on the counter. No one had scarcely noticed him.

"—Bet I can tell you where that money came from!" Morrow heard a voice say.

"Where do you think?"

"—Bank was robbed at Emery seven years ago!"

"By gosh, that's right! Robbers got about eight thousand dollars, didn't they?"

"And the bank never did get its money back!"

"Posse killed two of the robbers."

"One got away."

"They caught one."

"Served five years in the pen, he did."

"Been out of the pen almost two years, he has!"

"Suppose he could have buried that money and kept still about it all this time?"

"Now he's dug it up and sent it to Donna, expecting her to keep quiet about it."

"Been going with Donna, he has."

"He sends her the money, expecting her to keep still about it, then he marries her, gets the money and no one ever knows any different!"

"—The dirty, sneaking—"

"That's enough!" Will Morrow said. His voice stopped the whispers, quieted the buzz of conversation in the room. If they had noticed him at all standing quietly in the rear of the depot, they had not fully realized the significance of his presence. They realized it the instant he spoke. The voices died instantly. Sudden apprehension showed on the faces quickly turned toward him. They made room for him as he walked up to the counter and stood beside Donna.

"I thought you were my friends," he said slowly. "And some of you are my friends. All of you know what I have been trying to do and some of you—those of you who are my friends—have been trying to help me."

"That's right, Will," Ed Carter said. Here and there heads nodded in approval. But there were other heads who did not nod.

"Some of you are gossips," Morrow continued. "Gossips have ruined the lives of more men than whiskey and gambling put together. You will ruin mine, if I let you. You will crucify me, if I let you."

He paused. The anger that was boiling in him reddened his face.

"I don't care if you gossip about me, I don't care if you crucify me. I'm a man. I can take it. But this one thing you will not do: you will not crucify Donna Ross on the same cross with me, you will not blacken her name and her reputation by saying that I sent this money to her, you will not throw dirt on her by saying that she knows where this money came from. You will not do these things, not while I have life in my body!"

HIS anger was a furious burning flame sweeping over the crowd. Always, deep in Will Morrow's eyes, a subtle, almost hidden resentment had smouldered. This resentment was a roaring blaze now, feeding the flame of his anger.

"You know that I was one of the four men who robbed the bank at Emery seven years ago. You know I was released from prison two years ago, after serving my time. You know that as soon as I was released, I came right back here and went to work. You also know why I came back here and went to work—because I wanted to prove to you by hard work and right living what the jury would not believe seven years ago, that a pistol was at my back when I rode with the gang who robbed the bank. Now you are trying to say that the money which Donna received is the buried loot from that bank robbery, that I sent it to Donna, that she accidentally revealed the contents of the package—"

His voice broke. There was complete silence in the depot. Outside, the train whistled, chugged as it began to roll away.

"Any woman who says that I sent this money to Donna I will call a liar," Will Morrow said. "Any man who makes that statement I will ask to step outside."

His right hand went down, loosened the pistol in the holster at his hip.

Not a man moved, not a woman opened her mouth.

"I'm waiting," Will Morrow said.

There was silence in the depot.

"What's going on in there, a funeral?" a voice spoke from outside.

A stranger pushed into the depot, dropped a bag on the floor. "Name is Gholson," he said. "I just got off the train. Don't mean to intrude into anything that's none of my business—"

His arrival broke the tension. Feet shuffled as the crowd began to disperse. Many of them came up to Will Morrow to shake his hand. Others left without speaking.

Sam Ormsby took one look at Gholson and went out the back door.

Gholson saw the money on the counter. His eyes opened wide, then closed to narrow slits. "I don't mean to be butting into something that's none of my business—"

"I'll tell you," Will Morrow said. "I want everybody to know exactly what has happened.

When he had finished the story, Gholson whistled softly. He looked appraisingly at Morrow, then at Donna Ross. "So somebody sends this young lady seventy-eight hundred dollars. And she doesn't know who sent it or anything about it!"

"That's right," Morrow said stiffly. "Do you know anything about it?"

"Me? I just got into town. How would I know anything about this money?"

GHOLSON was tall and slightly stooped. There was a whitish pallor to his face. His eyes, a washed out blue, were coldly speculative. He was not wearing a gun.

"I didn't ask you how you would know anything about this money," Morrow answered. "I asked you if you did."

"And I'm telling you I don't."

"Okay. No more need be said."

"But what are you going to do with it?" Gholson persisted.

"It belongs to Donna, not to me," Morrow answered. "I'm not going to do anything with it."

"I don't know what I'm going to do with it," Donna Ross answered. "Except hold it until the rightful owner claims it. I know I wish I had never seen it. Are you coming with me, Will?"

There were traces of tears in her eyes as she wrapped up the bills and walked out of the station. Morrow went with her. The depot platform was deserted. She walked to the far end of it, then stopped.

"Will, do you think—" she began.

"Yes," Morrow answered. "I think the money is the loot from the Emery bank robbery of seven years ago."

She flinched at the meaning of the words. "Are you sure, Will?"

"No, I'm not sure, can't be sure. But the money is damp and moldy, which makes me think it has been buried ever since it was stolen. Somebody dug it up."

"But why did they send it to me?"

"That is something I can't even begin to understand," Morrow answered. "I know what some of the people here are thinking—"

"That's ridiculous!" Furious anger blazed in her eyes. "I won't have anybody saying you sent me this money."

"I can stop them from saying it to me or to you," Morrow said. "I can't stop them from saying it to each other and I can't stop them from thinking it.

No, Donna, whatever we may say about it, the fact is that money has ruined your reputation and my reputation." His voice softened. "I'm sorry, Donna. I'm really and truly sorry."

Fright, the inexplicable fright he had heard in her voice when she first called to him from inside the depot, was on her face.

"We're not going to let this money come between us, Will?" she whispered.

"Whether we like it or not, it has already come between us," he answered. "If you don't believe it, just notice the way people are watching us."

ACROSS the street from the depot was a barber shop. A general store stood next to it. The Three Star Saloon was on the corner. Farther down the street were other stores and another saloon. The day was Tuesday. Not many people were in town. From the barber shop, through the plate glass windows of the general store, above the swinging doors of the saloon, eyes were watching them. The story of how Donna Ross had received $7800.00 by express was going the rounds and growing bigger every time it was retold.

"An ex-convict can't afford to have people talking about him," Morrow said bitterly. "He particularly can't afford to have people talking about his wife—"

"Is this a proposal, Will?"

He had never proposed to her. He had never felt he could offer her a tarnished name.

"This is not a proposal, Donna. There will never be a proopsal unless we find out who sent you this money and why.

"How are we going to do that?"

"I can only think of one way," he answered. "It may be a dangerous way —for you."

"I am not afraid of danger, Will."

"I know you're not." A little of the resentment hidden deep with his eyes faded out as he looked at her. He told her his plan.

"This may work and it may not," he ended. "But my guess is that somebody somewhere is looking for that money, and will come hunting it. We'll use it to bait a trap and see what we can catch. Are you game, Donna?"

"I'm willing," she answered. "We're in a trap ourselves and the only way we can get out is to catch the man who ought to be in it and put him where he belongs."

Before noon of that day there appeared in the window of the little eating house known as Donna's Restaurant this crudely lettered sign:

FOUND
$7800.00
Rightful Owner Can Have Same by
Proving Ownership.
Donna Ross.

The sign attracted a great deal of attention. Every inhabitant in Burnstown strolled by and read it at least once. Many of them read it twice. Every cowboy who rode into town read it, every miner on his way to or from the Lucky Dick mines stopped to scan its contents. The owner of the Three Star Saloon and the house men who ran his faro and poker games read the sign. The proprietor of the barber shop, all the clerks from every store in town managed to slip away from work long enough to read the sign in the window of Donna's Restaurant. Ed Carter came by, so did Gholson, so did two other strangers in town.

Will Morrow, watching from the window of his little freight office across the street, saw every person who read the sign. He operated four wagons hauling freight from Burnstone to the nearby mines. He stayed in his office and took care of his business and watched Donna's Restaurant across the street. Always a gun was on his desk ready for his fingers.

CHAPTER III

WHEN night came, Morrow locked his little freight office and went across the street to eat. The restaurant was already crowded. The two waitresses were hopping from table to table like ranch women trying to feed a round-up crew. Donna was taking care of the counter and the cash drawer. Under a glass cake cover on the shelf behind the counter, in plain sight of everybody, were two stacks of moldy yellow bills.

"I've done more business since noon today than I usually do in a week," Donna greeted him.

His grin was wry. "They're all coming to look and every man jack of them is trying to figure out some way that *he* can prove ownership of that money. But they all figure it's stolen money and if they claim it, that will automatically prove they're thieves. Have you had any claimants yet?"

"Ed Carter brought this telegram by a while ago," Donna answered. She took a rectangle of yellow paper out of the cash drawer and handed it to him.

It was from the president of the Bank of Emery and it was addressed to Miss Donna Ross.

"Understand you have come into possession of loot taken from this bank in robbery seven years ago. Our representative will arrive nine forty train Wednesday morning to identify same and to file legal claim for possession."

Morrow lifted his eyebrows. "Emery is forty miles from here. News certainly gets around fast, doesn't it? Anything else happen?"

She flushed, answered slowly. "Ed Carter proposed to me again."

"What?" The shock of her words drained the blood from his face.

He had never proposed to Donna Ross. Because of that it seemed to him that no on else would ever propose to her. He knew that other men thought she was a mighty fine girl but for some other man to want to marry her—

"Don't act so shocked, Will. Ed was very nice. He wants to take me back East."

"But—"

"No, Will, no one has claimed the money yet. Is that what you were going to ask?"

It wasn't what he was going to ask. On second thought, he decided there was nothing he wanted to ask about. This was a free country. Ed Carter had the right to ask Donna to marry him if he wanted to. Only—

MORROW sat down at the counter. Donna silently fed him steak and fried potatoes. He ate in equal silence. When he left, he stopped only long enough at the front to pay his bill, and to say to Donna, "When you close up at nine o'clock, I'll take you home."

She nodded. Across the street in the dark freight office, he resumed his silent vigil. One by one he watched the diners lingeringly leave the restaurant. Horses clumped up and down the street, bearing lonely riders on mysterious night errands. A buggy passed. He could hear the rattle of the piano from the Three Star Saloon. A stranger stopped in front of the restaurant, read the sign, lingered a moment, then walked slowly down the street. Will Morrow slipped the gun back into its holster. He was looking for strangers. The man who tried to claim the money would probably be a stranger. No one in Burnstone would dare try to claim it.

Eight o'clock came. The last late diners were tackling a second helping of apple pie. By nine o'clock the place was empty, the two waitresses had left, and Donna was seated at the counter counting the cash. Morrow could see her through the window. He opened the door of his freight office, stepped out, turned to lock it.

Quick footsteps sounded on the board walk behind him. He straightened up. The club, gun barrel, blackjack, whatever it was, hit him across the back of the head with stunning force. The Arizona night was suddenly alive with shooting stars. Then the stars vanished in the wave of smothering blackness that engulfed him.

The trap had been set. The person to be caught in it had discovered the steel jaws waiting to clamp shut on him and had sprung the snare.

Will Morrow had a hard head. He was unconscious only a few minutes. Dazed and shaken, he dragged himself to his knees, looked around him. His assailant had vanished. Across the street the lights were still burning in the restaurant.

Somewhere in the distance he could hear the sound of galloping horses.

He stumbled across the street and into the restaurant.

"Donna!"

No answer.

"Donna, where are you?"

Silence greeted him.

Behind the counter, the glass cake cover had been overturned.

The two stacks of bills were gone.

He didn't even give a second thought to the fact that the money was missing. There was something far more important than the stacks of bills.

"Donna!" he called hoarsely.

Only then did he fully realize that Donna was gone too. He looked behind the counter. She wasn't there. He ran to the kitchen. An overturned chair was the only sign of disturbance.

Somewhere in the distance a gun boomed. Morrow's trained ears told him it was not a pistol but a heavy rifle that had exploded off to the south. He listened. The sound did not come again. The unknown rifleman only fired one shot.

BLOOD was running down Will Morrow's face from the groove on the side of his head where he had been struck. He let it run. To hell with a little blood. Donna was gone. The money was gone. To hell with the money! What did money matter? He started toward the front of the restaurant, stopped suddenly.

Some one had opened the front door and had entered the eating house.

"Donna? Is that you?"

Morrow shoved through the swinging door that led from the kitchen to the dining room. He looked into the startled face of Ed Carter.

"I saw the lights were still on and came in," the railroad agent said. His eyes were on the blood running down the side of Morrow's face, on the drawn gun the latter held in his hand.

"Will! What on earth happened?"

"Somebody slugged me," Morrow answered.

"Slugged you?" Carter repeated. Realization that something was very much wrong suddenly dawned on him. He looked quickly around the restaurant, saw the overturned cake cover.

"Where's the money, Will?"

"I don't know."

"You don't—" Full realization that something else was missing hit Ed Carter. Morrow was suddenly aware that the station agent had him by the shoulders and was attempting to shake him.

"Where is Donna, Will? Where is Donna?" Carter was screaming the words, repeating them over and over again.

"Gone," Morrow said.

"Gone? Gone where?"

"Damn you for a fool, Ed Carter! How in the hell do I know where she's gone? She is just gone, that's all."

"God!" Ed Carter said. A dazed, uncomprehending look was in his eyes. It was the kind of a look that comes into the eyes of a man whose world has suddenly been overturned. Morrow felt sorry for Carter in that moment. Carter unquestionably loved Donna Ross. If she had not already told him the man had proposed to her, Morrow would have known from the look in the agent's eyes how he felt.

"I can't believe it, Will," he said huskily. "A woman—"

"I though nobody in this country would touch a woman either," Morrow said. "I was wrong. Donna has been kidnaped. The man who grabbed the money took her with him."

"God!" Carter repeated. The dazed, uncomprehending look was beginning to fade from his eyes.

"Will," he said.

"What is it?"

"I saw a man and a woman riding out of town."

"Was it Donna?"

"I don't know. I couldn't tell in the dark. Anyhow I didn't pay much attention. But it must have been Donna."

"How long ago was this?"

"Ten, maybe fifteen minutes?"

"Come on," Morrow bruskly said. He went out of the restaurant on the run. Ed Carter followed right behind him.

MORROW kept three saddle horses in the same barn where he kept the mules used to pull his freight wagons. The startled Mexican stable boy, playing pitch with a comrade, found his game was most rudely interrupted. Two frantic men, one of them his boss, the other the station agent from the railroad, jerked him from his game and demanded saddled horses instantly. After disturbing him so badly, they didn't even wait for him to get the horses for them. They bridled and saddled the horses themselves, throwing blankets and leather on to the two handiest horses with a speed that shocked his siesta-loving soul to the core.

"You got a gun?" his boss asked the railroad agent as they tightened the cinches.

Senor Carter nodded.

"Which way were they heading?"

"South," Senor Carter answered. "They took the road to the south."

The Mexican stable boy will tell the story of how the two men rode away to his dying day.

"—Rode away so fast they threw dirt clear over the barn," he says.

A mile out of town Will Morrow's horse shied at something lying in the road. He reined the animal back into the beaten track, started on. Ed Carter pulled up sharply.

"That's a corpse in the road!" he yelled.

Morrow's heart leaped up into his mouth. "A corpse?" he repeated.

Carter was already riding back. Morrow spurred his horse ahead of the railroad agent, swung from the saddle, hastily struck a match.

The face of Sam Ormsby looked up at him from a dusty road. The bullet from a heavy rifle had knocked a hole through Ormsbys' chest.

Distant in the darkness, brought to his ears by some vagary of the night wind, Morrow heard the sound of galloping horses. He swung back into the saddle.

"The road makes an elbow and turns west," he said. "They're following the road. You follow them and I'll cut across country and head them off."

"But what about Ormsby?" Carter protested.

"He's dead. He'll keep," Morrow answered. "Donna is still alive. Get moving, Carter. We got no time to waste tonight."

Without waiting to see what Carter would do, Morrow reined his horse out of the unfenced ruts that marked the road south from Burnstone, dug spurs into the animal's side.

CHAPTER IV

LOGICALLY, the man who had kidnaped Donna—Carter had seen only one man but others might have been waiting outside of town—should have been completely gone by the time Morrow and Carter succeeded in saddling horses and following. Something had delayed Donna's kidnaper. Morrow had no way of knowing what had caused the delay but he grimly suspected that Ormsby, lying back there in the road, could have given him some information on the subject if the mining man had been able to talk. But Ormsby wasn't doing any talking, now or ever. His dead body in the road was another black mystery of the night.

Following the road somewhere to the south was another mystery, the man who had stolen the money and kidnaped Donna. Why had he taken the girl with him? Morrow could think of two reasons. First, she might have recognized him. In that case, he would take her along to keep her from revealing his identity until he was safely beyond the reach of possible pursuers. The second reason—well, why would a man, probably already a criminal, compel an attractive girl to ride out into the night with him?

Thinking of that second reason, Morrow ruined a horse that night but when he pulled up in a patch of shinnery oak beside the road, he was ahead of the man he was seeking. Listening, he could hear the clop, clop of trotting horses coming in his direction. He slipped from the saddle into the breast-high growth of green shrubbery, slid the pistol from its holster. The bright starlight, the night sky shine of the western country, revealed two dark figures moving along the road. One wore a hat, the other was hatless. They pulled up before they reached him.

"Thought I heard a runnin' horse," a man's muffled voice said.

His companion said nothing.

"Did you hear it?" he continued. "Speak up."

"I don't hear anything," Morrow heard Donna Ross' dispirited voice answer.

"I don't hear anything now, either. But I heard it a while ago and now I don't hear it. Which makes me think somebody might have cut in ahead of us and got off his horse—"

"Hands up!" Morrow said sharply. He stepped into the road. "We've got you surrounded."

"Surrounded?"

"Yes, surrounded," Morrow answered. "Donna, kick your horse in the side—"

Bang!

THE bullet passed within inches of Morrow's head. Simultaneously one horse veered to the side of the road. The other horse, driven by a furious spur tearing into his flank, leaped ahead and came thundering down the road toward Morrow.

The rider, leaning over and riding like an Indian, was trying to ride Morrow down.

Will Morrow knew he had had to take this chance when he stepped into the road. His hope had been that he could bluff the kidnaper into believing he was surrounded. It was a hope that had failed. He dived for the side of the road. Bullets knocked dirt around him as he hit the ground.

The horse thundered past. A bulge on the side showed where the rider, one leg thrown over the saddle, was clinging to the horse's mane. Morrow, both elbows on the ground, grasped the pistol in both hands like it was a rifle, aimed, fired one shot.

The horse stumbled, screamed, fell, and rolled. The bulge in the saddle went down with the animal. The night was suddenly hideous with the screams of a horse and a man. Morrow ran forward. The screams of the horse sickened him. He did not know whether his bullet had hit it or whether it had stumbled.

The man was lying on the ground moaning.

"My leg . . . Don't shoot . . . I got a broken leg . . ."

The man sat up as Morrow approached. He caught the glint of starlight on steel in time to kick the gun out of the man's hand.

"You'll have two broken legs if you try that again." He picked up the gun.

"Who the devil are you?"

"Gholson . . . Don't shoot. I'll give you the money. Mister, I'm suffering. . . ."

"Suffer and be damned. *Donna!*"

"Will, are you all right? I recognized your voice."

She was riding toward him. Although she was wearing a skirt, she had been forced to straddle a man's saddle. Her feet had been tied underneath. Morrow hastily cut the ropes. She slid out of the saddle into his arms.

"Are you all right, Donna? Are you all right?" I got the man who kidnapped you."

"That isn't the man who kidnapped me, Will?"

"What?"

Ormsby did that. He came into the restaurant just as I was closing up and pulled a gun. He made me go with him."

"Ormsby did that? Then what about this fellow?" He pointed to the moaning man on the ground.

"He waylaid us just outside of town and killed Ormsby. Then he made me come along with him."

"Why did he shoot Ormsby?"

"I don't know, Will."

MORROW took precious minutes to comfort the girl, then turned to the man on the ground. The click of the hammer on his gun was loud in the darkness.

"Listen, Gholson, or whatever your name is, just exactly what is going on here? Why did you shoot Ormsby? And where do you fit into this?"

"You wouldn't shoot a man with a broken leg, would you, mister?"

"I wouldn't shoot to kill. Do you want two broken legs?"

"You mean—"

"I'll put a bullet through your good leg. Talk!"

Gholson talked. He knew it was time to talk. Something in Morrow's voice scared all bravado out of him. "I just got out of the pen," he said. "While I was in the jug I got to be real friendly with a lifer who said he had helped hold up a bank in a little town—"

Gholson paused. "I can't remember the name of the town."

"Emery!" Morrow said harshly. "Go on."

"Emery! That was the name of the place. He said he had helped rob the bank there and then had had to bury the loot. Before he could go back after it, he had been picked up on an old murder charge. So there he was in the pen for life and there the money was, buried."

"The convict's name was Land, John Land," Morrow said. "Go on."

"How'd you know his name?" Gholson answered, surprised.

"Because he was the only one of the men who escaped after holding up the bank at Emery. He told you where the money was buried? Is that right?"

"That's right. He made a map for me. I came down here looking for it as soon as I got out."

"Where does Ormsby fit into the picture?"

"I couldn't locate the money. Even with the map, I needed somebody who knew more about the country than I did. I found Ormsby here in Burnstone. I had known him before."

"Then what happened?"

"Ormsby and I found the money. Then the dirty ——— doublecrossed me and stole it. I trailed him to the railroad, found where he had sent a package by express and had bought a ticket to Burnstone."

"A package? Do you think he expressed the money to Donna?"

"Mister, I think the money was in that package. I think he sent it by express because he was afraid to carry it with him. He knew I would be after him so he was afraid I would catch up with him and take the money. But, mister, I'm just as much in the dark as you are about a lot of things that have happened. All I know is that I came to Burnstone and found the money all spread out on the depot counter and a hell of an argument going on. I discovered Ormsby. I saw him slug you, kidnap the girl, and grab the dough. I knew he would head south so I went south and waited for him. That's all I know."

"I get it," Morrow said slowly. "At least I see how you and Ormsby found the money and how it got sent by express to Burnstone. I understand all that. But there is one thing I don't even begin to understand—"

Morrow was squatting on his heels beside Gholson.

The bullet knocked his hat off.

IN THE shinnery oak cluster the revolver exploded a second time.

Morrow was already moving before the second slug smashed at him. He was still holding his own gun in his hand. He shot at the flash of flame in the dark growth of oak shrubbery. The hidden marksman shot back. The slug went twenty feet in the air.

Morrow shot again.

No answering shot came back.

He took steady aim at the spot where he had seen the pistol flash, and fired again.

A man came stumbling out of the shinnery oak. Holding his chest, he staggered as he walked. He walked like a blind man, stumbled, fell, got up and stumbled again. He was coughing his guts out as he tried to get to his feet.

Morrow slipped fresh cartridges into his gun. He walked slowly to the kneeling man.

"Why did you do it, Ed?" he asked. "Why did you do it?"

"I wanted to bust you and Donna up," Ed Carter answered. "I saw my chance and I took it."

"You put *her* name on that package of money!" Morrow said. His voice was as hard as the granite core of the western mountains.

The railroad agent coughed. "The package . . . was . . . a little broken . . . in shipping. I saw what was inside it. . . . Guessed . . . it must be the loot . . . from the Emery bank holdup . . . you had gone to the pen for . . ."

"Go on," Morrow said.

"I . . . made out a new . . . bill of lading. . . . Since it was . . . stolen money . . . Ormsby wouldn't dare . . . raise a holler . . . or claim the package . . . was his. Wrote Donna's name on the new . . . bill of lading . . ."

Donna Ross got up from the road where she had thrown herself at the first pistol shot. She stood silently beside Morrow.

"— I knew . . ." Carter whispered huskily, ". . . when Donna opened the package . . . she would tell . . . what was in it. Everybody would think . . . you had sent her the money. It would ruin . . . your reputation. You . . . bein' an ex- . . . ex-convict . . . didn't have much of a good name anyhow. You . . . couldn't prove . . . you hadn't sent the money to her. You . . . couldn't face what people . . . would say about you. . . . You'd have to leave. Then . . . I'd . . . have a . . . chance . . . with . . ."

He coughed again, leaned forward, held himself on his knees with one hand. A little by little the strength went out of that hand. He slipped forward on his face, coughed, died. Off in the darkness the horse he had ridden, and hidden when the flash of pistols up ahead warned him that Morrow had overtaken Donna and her kidnapper, whinnied.

Morrow slid the pistol back into its holster. "So that's the way it was," he said slowly. "Carter put your name on the bill of lading. He did it to ruin *me*, to get me run out of the country, so he would have a free hand with you. It would have worked, too. If we hadn't found out what really happened, I couldn't have faced what people would have said about me. Donna, you must be a wonderful woman, to inspire men to take chances like that . . ."

"Maybe he didn't know," Donna Ross answered. "But he never had a chance."

In that moment it seemed to Will Morrow that the starlight brightened, the night shine grew brighter in the sky overhead.

"That's all I need to know," he said. "No matter what anybody says now, I can face it."

STRANGE TEMPTATION

THE general sat with bowed head. The key to victory had just been presented to him. Before him stood a man who swore he could abduct the opposing general and force the surrender of the enemy army. The man torn by this strange temptation was Jefferson Davis, president of the Confederacy. The bold schemer was Major Walker Taylor, a cousin of the first Mrs. Davis. The man whose capture was being plotted was Abraham Lincoln!

It was early summer of 1862. Already the Confederate Army was showing the strain of the supply shortage. Surely this plan could not have arrived at a more opportune time. Still shaken with doubt, Davis turned to the Major.

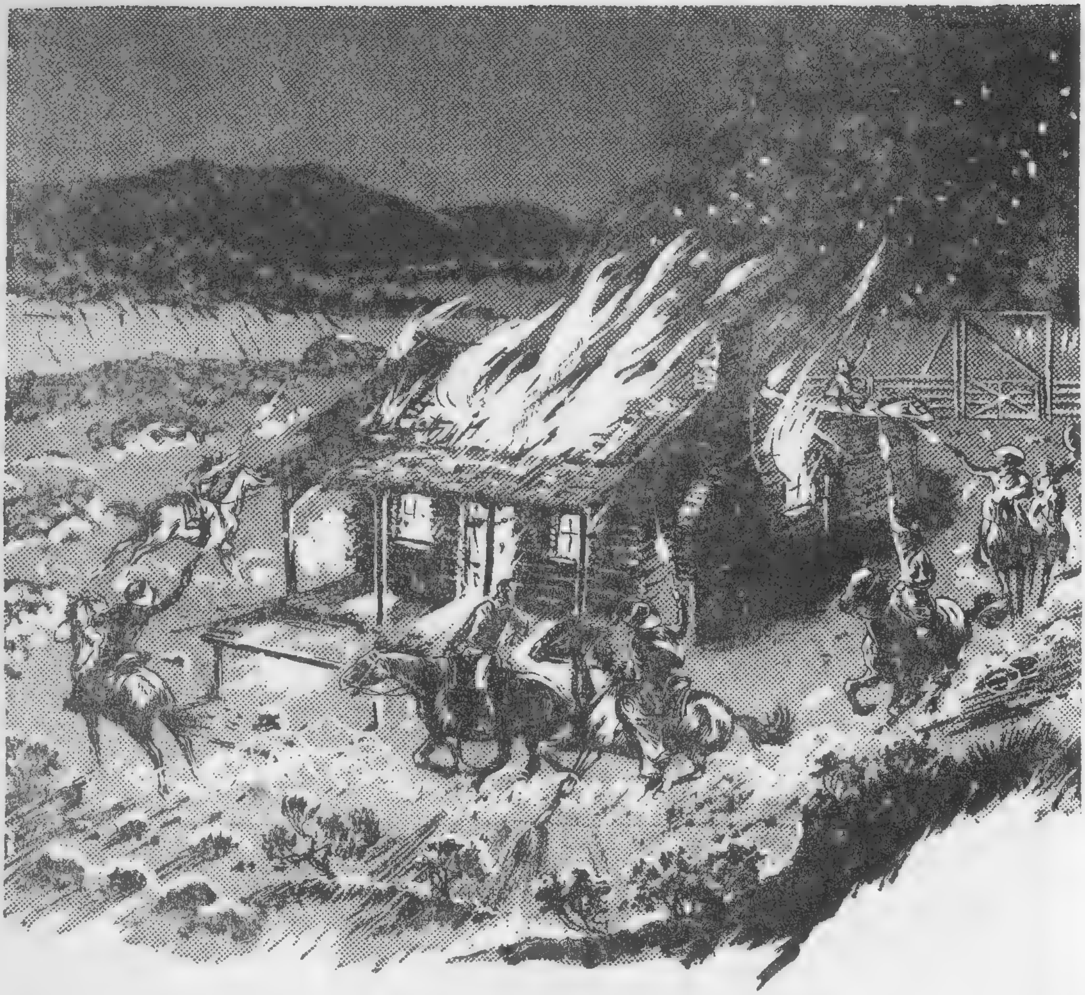
"How could you do it?" he asked.

The Major replied: "Lincoln does not leave the White House until evening or near twilight, and then only with a driver. He takes a lonely ride two or three miles in the country to a place called the Soldiers' Home, which is his summer residence. My point is to capture Lincoln, run him down the Potomac, and cross him over just where I crossed, and the next day we will have him here."

Could Davis afford to overlook such a possibility for the sake of the principles of justice and honor which had been part of his background as a southern gentleman? Apparently he could, for those who witnessed this amazing interview saw him shake his head and say, "I cannot give my authority, Walker." Then he went on to explain his surprising decision.

"He would undoubtedly vigorously resist capture. In that case you would kill him. I could not stand the imputation of having consented to let Lincoln be assassinated. Our cause could not stand it. Besides, what value would he be to us as a prisoner? If he were brought to Richmond, what could I do with him? He would have to be treated like a Magistrate of the North, and we have neither the time nor the provision. No, sir, I will not give my authority to abduct Lincoln."

Had Davis not overcome this strange temptation, the course of the war and the years which followed might have taken a shape more fantastic than any the imagination could dare to weave. That Davis refused is a tribute to his own courage and moral judgment.—*Pete Bogg.*



"...AND A GUN"

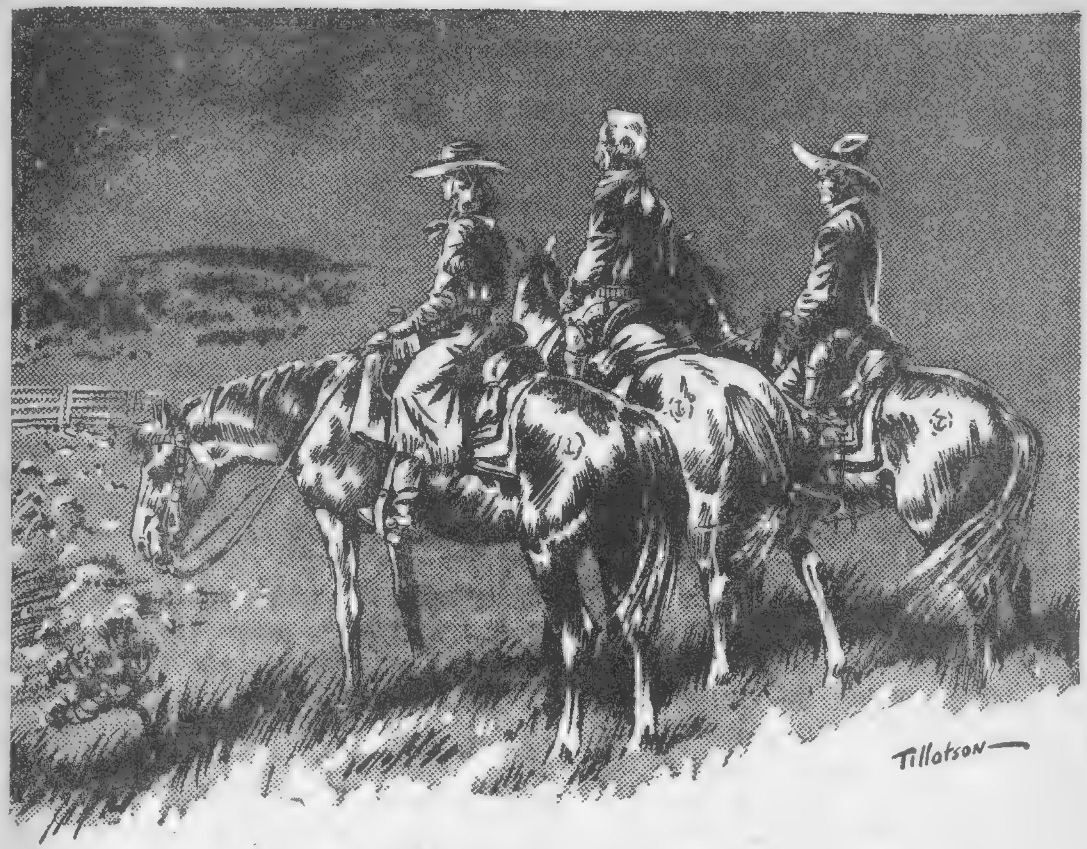
by Robert Moore Williams

WHEN Lee Jones got off the train and stepped down on the depot platform of the little northern New Mexico town of Walden, he did not look like the son of old Nard Jones, whom the surrounding range country knew as a stem-winding old hell-bender from the upper reaches of Bitter Creek.

He looked like a college student.

He *was* a college student.

This pale-faced youth of twenty, this peg-top-pants clad boy, this college student, was the son and heir of old Nard Jones, who could barely read and write and who had laid the foundations of a cattle empire by the free use of a running iron.



It's a difficult thing to stand by while your ranch is being burned to the ground. When this happens you need faith, friends—and a gun.

Nard Jones was one of the toughest old hombres who ever rode the river.

His son looked like a ninny.

The black band around Lee Jones' upper arm showed why he had come home.

Old Nard Jones was dead.

While the train pulled out behind him, Lee Jones stood on the wooden depot platform looking at the town of Walden, feeling it, smelling it. He had memories of this town and of this country. Dim memories, to be sure. He hadn't set foot in this country in eight years, not since his mother had died when he was twelve years old and his father had packed him off east to get an education and learn how to be a gentleman.

Because old Nard Jones could barely read and write, he had thought an education was a wonderful asset. Because his own manners were the manners of the trail herd, of the cowcamp, of the range and the river, he had been determined that his son should know how to use a fork without fumbling. Old Nard Jones had hungered after what he thought were the better things of life.

Old Nard was not a prophet. He could foresee the wind and the weather, he could smell a norther days away, he could forecast the price of beef come next roundup time, but he could not foresee the terrible predicament his hunger would eventually pose for his son.

Lee Jones stood on the station platform, savoring the feel of the land. This was his town, this was his country, this was his world. He belonged here. He had come home. He remembered this little town. He remembered most of all the high sky of this land and the blue mountains off in the far distance.

THE Bar Y was over there toward those mountains, over there sixty miles away. The Bar Y, with its thousands of cattle, its tremendously huge ranch house made of logs, its bunk house where twenty waddies lived and played practical jokes on each other, the kitchen where the two Chinese cooks labored nightly, the rambling rose that grew all along the trellis of the vast front porch. This was the Bar Y ranch as he remembered it.

His ranch now.

He was the heir.

The glow of satisfaction he felt at the knowledge of owning this prize property was lessened by the sadness he felt at his father's death. Eight days of jolting, tiring riding had passed since he received the wire from Edward Glisson, the lawyer who handled his father's legal affairs. The telegram had given only the barest details. "Regret to inform you of death of Narden Jones and wish to express sympathy at your loss. Funeral will be held immediately. Your presence here necessary as soon as possible in order to settle estate."

Lee Jones remembered Glisson very well. His father had taken him to the lawyer's office and introduced him when he was leaving for school. During the eight years that had passed since that day, he had received regular monthly remittances from Glisson, each accompanied by a note. During the whole time Lee had been east, these notes, with the exception of the address, had not varied a word.

Mater Lee Jones,
Bates Hall,
Princeton University,
Princeton, New Jersey.

Dear Lee:—

Your father has directed me to send you the enclosed draft to meet your regular expenses. He has further directed me to request you to draw a sight draft on him to meet any unusual outlay necessitated either by educational requirements of extra-curricular pursuits.

Your father also wishes me to state that he is well and to express the hope that you are enjoying good health also.

Sincerely yours,
Edward Glisson.

Old Nard could barely write. This was his excuse for not writing to a lonely boy in an eastern school, a boy who didn't even get to come home during vacations. Old Nard footed the bills and had his lawyer write. If the thought that the boy might need more than this ever occurred to him, he was too emotionally repressed to express it. And, of course, he never sensed what he was doing to his son.

Standing on the depot platform, Lee could see the general store on the west side of the square. One of the windows on the second floor bore this sign

EDWARD GLISSON
Attorney at Law

He picked up his bags and started toward the office of the only man he felt he knew in the whole western country.

GLISSON was in his office when Lee walked in. The lawyer was a gentle-faced white-haired elderly man. He smiled and said, "Hello, son. What can I do for you?" Lee realized then that Glisson did not know him. To the lawyer he was Master Lee Jones, a boy to whom he had been writing identical letters every month but whom he did not know. Lee felt suddenly shy in the presence of this man, suddenly alone.

"Mr.—Mr. Glisson?" he stammered the words.

"That's right," the lawyer answered. He looked at the youth standing in the doorway of his office.

"I'm—You don't know me, I'm afraid. I'm—My name is Jones."

Startled recognition dawned on the lawyer's face. He got swiftly to his feet, came across the room with quick strides, his hand outstretched.

"Lee! I'm sorry, but I didn't recognize you. You've changed, lad. My, how you've changed!"

The lawyer's handclasp was warm and firm but Lee Jones sensed the reserve in it. He sensed it also in the lawyer's face. Glisson was trying desperately hard to be kind, to be friendly, but he was hiding some secret shock that this meeting had given him.

"Lee," the lawyer said. "I wouldn't have known you. You certainly don't look like your father."

The tone of his voice told what the words did not say. Lee Jones certainly did not look like his father. Old Nard had stood six feet two in his bare feet and he had weighed a hundred and ninety-five on the hoof. Never in his life had there been a pound of fat on him. At twenty, his son stood five feet ten and he was so slender he looked frail.

The old range bull has sired a scrub calf, Glisson was thinking. That was what the tone of his voice said. But the words only said that Lee certainly did not look like his father.

"Come in, Lee. Come in and sit down."

Lee Jones found himself sitting in a stiff chair beside the lawyer's high roll-top desk. And Glisson was talking to him, asking him what kind of a trip he had had, asking him how he had liked school, talking about different things, but never mentioning what Lee wanted to know. And Lee in turn did not know how to ask. They had taught him many things in Princeton, philosophy and higher mathematics and history, but they had not taught him how to ask about his father, how to ask the simple little vitally important personal questions that he wanted answered.

"I suppose you will want to know about the estate?" Glisson said at last. He seemed to have been mustering up his courage to ask this question.

"Yes," Lee answered. It wasn't too important, the estate. The Bar Y with its thousands of cattle was something he took for granted.

Glisson took off his glasses and polished them vigorously. Then he set them back on his nose and looked steadily at Lee.

"I'm—ah—afraid you're in for a shock, my boy," he said kindly.

"What?" Lee said.

"Ah—" the lawyer started to speak, then changed his mind. He searched among the papers on his desk. "I have a copy of your father's will here. Where is it? I was looking at it only this morning."

Fretfully he pawed the papers aside.

"Sometimes, you know, things don't quite work out the way we plan them," he said without looking up.

Lee Jones sat in silence. In the street outside the office he could hear the clump of a trotting horse mingled with the rattle of a light spring wagon. In the store under him, he could hear a clerk rattling tin pans.

What had Glisson meant when he said, "I'm afraid you're in for a shock?"

"Ah, here it is," the lawyer said, finding the will. "This document was drawn eight years ago, when you left for school. It has never been changed." He glanced at Lee, then looked quickly back at the sheets of legal paper he was holding.

"We will dispense with reading the unessential parts which cover payment of just debts and provision for burial," he said. "Here is the meat of the document." He cleared his throat and began to read.

"All my property, real and personal, wheresoever and howsoever situated, I devise and bequeath to my beloved son, Lee Jones, to have and to hold forever."

THE tension that had been building up in Lee Jones ran out of him in little quivers of nervous energy. Somehow the lawyer's words had scared him. He had thought something was wrong. There wasn't anything wrong. His father had left him the Bar Y and all other property, real and personal. More important even than that, Old Nard had referred to him as "my beloved son."

Those three words, they counted for something. They wiped out some of the emptiness of the lonely years. A twelve-year-old boy needs affection. He needs to know he belongs to someone, that he belongs somewhere. From the time he was twelve until he was twenty, all Lee Jones had ever known of affection was the cold monthly notes written by Glisson. These counted for something but they didn't count for near enough. It helped to know that his father, in spite of his seeming indifference and his silence, had thought of him as "my beloved son."

Glisson was looking at him over the sheets of legal paper.

"He—he called me his—his 'beloved son,' " Lee Jones stammered.

"He always thought of you that way," Glisson said softly. "Maybe he didn't show it, but that was the way he felt. However—"

"When can I go out to the ranch?" Lee questioned. "I want to see it."

There was a look of pain in the lawyer's fine eyes. "I think that can be arranged, Lee. I think it can be arranged. However—"

He was holding another sheet of paper in his hand.

"I have something else here," he said. His voice was thin and taut and old.

"A copy of a quit-claim deed, 'All my property, real and personal, wheresoever and howsoever situated, with the exception of my horse, my saddle, and my gun, is conveyed by this instrument to the holder hereof.' "

Glisson looked at the silent youth sitting beside his desk. He tapped the sheet of paper with his finger. "This quit-claim deed was signed by your father," he said. "It was used by him as a stake in the no-limit poker game in which he was playing the night he was killed."

The lawyer's voice cracked like a broken violin string and went into taut silence. He hated to say those words, he hated to say them worse than he hated the fires of hell. Yet the words were true, they gave an accurate picture of what had happened, and they had to be spoken, they had to be said.

Instead of dying peaceably in bed, Old Nard Jones had died in a blazing gun-fight over a disputed deal in a no-limit poker game.

Instead of leaving his son a rich and prosperous ranching establishment, he had left his heir a horse and a gun.

CHAPTER II

LEE JONES sat stiffly in the chair beside the lawyer's desk. If his world had dropped out from under him, no sign of it showed on his face.

Glisson was trying to talk. And the lawyer, facing this silent youth, was fumbling for words. Trying to find the right thing to say, Glisson was doubting if there were any right things. How can you tell a youth that his father was a wild and woolly old hell-bender, tough as boot leather and as rough as cactus? What do you say in a situation like this? You have told the youth his father died in a gun fight. You have told the boy he is a pauper. What do you say next?

"Ah—You must realize that this is the west, that things are done differently here than they are back east. You must also realize—ah—that your father was—a hard man, a man who had few friends and many enemies. I always counted myself as one of his friends. I think that ah—Bitts Mason—I don't know whether he was here when you went off to school—was another real friend. There are others too, no doubt, old-timers who came early into this country."

Glisson paused and polished his spectacles.

"What about this poker game?" Lee Jones said.

"I know only what was brought out at the inquest," Glisson answered. "Four men were in the game. Your father was one. Samson Shute was another. Richard Holmes and Harley Fox were the third and fourth. The last two men are eastern capitalists who are seeking investments in western ranch properties. Samson Shute is a local man, owner of a prosperous ranch. The game had been going on most of the night. On the last deal, your father felt he had a winning hand. When the cards were displayed after the draw, he had a losing hand. He had bet everything he owned on earth on those cards. The evidence brought out at the inquest indicated that your father attempted to draw a gun when he saw he had lost. Fox, who had dealt the hand, shot him through the head."

There was pain in Glisson's voice, and sympathy. "I'm sorry to be the one to tell you this," he said.

"That's quite all right," Lee Jones said. "Someone had to tell me. As my father's lawyer, you were the logical man. Thank you very much."

He got to his feet.

"Wait a minute," Glisson said. "You're not leaving?"

"I thought I might as well," Lee answered.

"But—" The lawyer was alarmed. "Where are you going to stay? What are you going to do?"

The mounting pressure in the youth's mind had forced out all thoughts of ordinary things. Where would he stay? "I'll stop at the hotel for a day or two," he said vaguely.

He was hiding his shock and his pain, his terrible bewilderment, crushing them down inside of him.

The lawyer stared at him. "Do you have any money?"

"Yes, thank you," Lee answered.

"How much money?" the lawyer bluntly asked.

"Enough," Lee answered, his voice sullen and sharp.

"I would be glad to advance—" At the look on the face of the youth the lawyer hastily changed his mind about what he was going to say. "Wait a minute, Lee," he protested. "There are things we have to talk about."

"What?"

"Your future, for one thing. Have you—ah—would you like to return to college?"

Lee shook his head. "I don't see much point in talking about that, sir."

"But—"

"As I understand it, all I have from

my father's estate is a horse, a saddle, and a gun. Is that correct?"

"I'm afraid that's right. But—"

"We don't ride horses at Princeton so we don't need saddles. As for the gun, I'm afraid the proctors would be shocked about it."

GLISSON rose to his feet. He set his spectacles firmly on his nose and looked at the youth. "Lee, I realize this is a shock to you but don't be getting your tail up and running out on me. I'm your friend. You have only one more year in college. Is that right?"

At the youth's nod, Glisson continued. "I'll be glad to lend you the money to finish your training."

Lee Jones heard the words but they didn't seem to mean anything to him. Yet when he had come west his only thought had been to return east and finish college. Life back there in Princeton was pleasant, easy, and full of fun. Glisson was offering him a way to go back to this easy life, to the only life he knew.

"Thank you, Mr. Glisson," he said.

The lawyer smiled. "Then you'll do it, Lee? I'm sure your father would have wished it—"

"First, I want to ask you a question?" Lee Jones said.

"Sure." The lawyer hesitated wondering what was going to be asked.

"Why did my father exempt a horse, a saddle, and a gun from the property he was wagering?"

Lee Jones saw the amazement on the lawyer's face.

"Well—ah—"

"Why did he do it?"

The lawyer hesitated. "Your father was a strange man."

"Why did he reserve these three things from his wager?" Lee Jones persisted.

"Because — ah — Well, because he always claimed that a horse, a saddle, and a gun were all any man needed for a successful start in life."

Lee Jones nodded. "I can't remember him very well but I *can* remember his favorite saying: 'A horse, a saddle, and a gun was all I had when I started'. I think that answers your question about whether or not I will accept a loan to return to college. I thank you very much, but that's what Old Nard left me and that's what I'll take. That, I think, is all I'll ever need."

He turned and walked out of the office. And if he left a tremendously surprised, baffled, but terribly pleased attorney-at-law behind him, he did not know it. For the tears in his own eyes effectively blinded his vision.

A horse, a saddle, and a gun.

You could use them to build an empire or you could use them to ride to hell.

As he walked down the outside stairs to the board sidewalk on the street below, he was still too disturbed, too upset emotionally to notice where he was going. The girl in pigtails was walking in front of the store. She stepped out from the front of the store at the same moment he came down the steps.

He bumped into her so hard he knocked her out into the dusty street.

A hunched up little man was riding one horse and leading another.

She fell directly in front of the ridden horse.

The group of men lounging in front of the store stiffened. A hulking giant started quickly toward the girl.

LEE JONES moved very fast. He had the girl in his arms and had snatched her out of danger before the rider could jerk his horse to one side.

"I'm very sorry," he apologized. "It was all my fault. I just didn't notice you—"

She was just a kid, a youngster. A ribbon in her hair and pigtails down her back. A blue middy blouse, a short black skirt, ribbed stockings and buttoned shoes. Well developed hips and two firm little breasts completely out of keeping with her clothes. An elfin face with gray, frightened eyes.

"Did I hurt you?" Lee Jones asked.

"Oh, no, sir," she quickly answered. She began brushing the dust from her skirt. "I'm quite all right, sir."

"I'm very sorry," he repeated. "Here. Let me help you back to the sidewalk."

He took her elbow.

"Take your hands off that girl!" a raging voice said behind him. "Take your hand off her, I said. Take 'em off of her!"

He felt himself seized and roughly shoved aside. He turned quickly.

A giant of a man in worn high-heeled boots, faded blue levis and a sweat-stained gray hat was glaring fiercely at him. Holstered at the giant's hip was a black-butted pistol.

"I beg your pardon," Lee Jones said.

The giant looked at the girl. "Git in the spring wagon, sis," he said. "And git a-runnin'."

For an instant, the girl looked like she was going to defy him. Hot anger flashed across the elfin face, burned in the gray eyes. She faced the man.

"Git!" he said, pointing.

At the hard harshness in his voice, her courage faltered. Turning, she scurried down the street. Her heels rattled on the board walk. Pig tails and skirt flying, she went around the corner.

"I beg your pardon," Lee Jones said again.

The giant turned his attention from the running girl to the youth. He looked at Lee Jones. His gaze took in the well-tailored sport clothes, the high collar and flowing tie. Contempt showed on his face.

"You push that girl agin and I'll knock your damned head off," he said.

"I didn't push her," Lee Jones answered.

"Yeah? Well, I saw it, and all I got to say is you do it again and you'll wish you hadn't. Who the hell are you anyhow? Where'd you come from? I ain't never seen you around these parts before."

There was contempt in the voice and contempt in the expression on the man's face.

"I came from the east," Lee Jones said.

The contempt deepened on the giant's face. "Maybe back east they push girls around but they don't do it out here."

"My name is Lee Jones," the youth said.

The contempt on the giant's face gave way to startled surprise. H looked Lee over again.

"You Old Nard's brat?"

"That's right."

The loungers in front of the store were silently watching. The man on horseback had pulled his mount to a stop and was listening.

A LITTLE stir ran over the watchers at the name. Some faces suddenly showed interest, others quickly showed a studied lack of interest. The wizened little man on horseback leaned forward.

The giant was still studying the youth.

"Well, I'll be god-damned!" he said at last.

He spat on the ground.

"Old Nard shore came up with a range colt when he got you," he said. "Well, even if you are Old Nard's kid, you don't go pushin' my girl around, not you nor nobody else, but especially not you."

Spitting on the ground again, the giant turned his back and started to step back on the sidewalk.

Lee Jones caught him by the shoulder, spun him around.

"I beg your pardon," the youth said.

His right fist smashed against the big man's jaw.

Lee Jones felt fire shoot through his arm. Hitting this man was like hitting so much granite. Anger was boiling furiously in him. He struck again.

The big man's eyes opened in shocked surprise. He roared and reached out with both hands.

Lee felt himself lifted off the ground and flung through the air. He hit with a thud that knocked most of the wind out of him. Before he could get to his feet, the big man was on top of him and had rolled him on his back.

One knee was thrust with murderous pressure into his stomach, the left hand was around his throat.

The right, balled into a fist, was smashing with pile-driver force against his face.

"You miserable little eastern dude—"

Whack!

"You dirty little sneakin'—"

Whack!

The blows jolted and tore at Lee Jones. He tried to strike upward but the big face was out of his reach. He tried to roll to one side but the hand around his throat and the knee in his stomach held him effectively.

"Say 'uncle'," the big man ordered.

"Go—to hell!"

Whack!

"Say you've had enuf."

"Go—" There wasn't enough air in his lungs nor enough strength in his body to say more.

Smack! The fist struck again.

Lee Jones felt blackness begin to close in around him. He was being beaten unconscious and he knew it. There was nothing he could do. The big man felt like he weighed a ton. The knee in his stomach was agony, the hand around his throat was throttling him, the first was pounding him to pieces.

He barely heard the voice quietly say:

"That's enough, Samson."

He knew the fist quit hitting him and the pressure lessened around his throat, letting air flow to his tortured lungs. The knee sayed on his stomach but he was aware that the big man was looking up.

"He asked for it," he heard the big man say.

THE wizened little man who had been riding the horse had dismounted. In a slight crouch, hands hanging loosely at his side, elbows slightly bent, he was standing ten feet away intently watching.

"He asked for it!" the big man repeated, snarling.

"Yeah?" the wizened man answered. "Samson, the question is: Are you askin' for it?"

He didn't seem very dangerous standing there, he didn't raise his voice, he didn't make threatening gestures, but there was an unmistakable air of menace about him.

The loungers, the group that had quickly gathered when the fiight started, began to move unobtrusively. The space behind the big man was suddenly clear.

"Why, damn you—" the big man said. He still kept his knee on Lee's stomach.

"You want to kill the boy, Samson? You want to beat him to death?"

"Why—" The big man suddenly seemed to think about this. He seemed to find this a subject worth thinking about.

" 'Cause if you want to beat him to death, Samson, you'll naturally want to take care of me first. That's about the only way you can do it, Samson, while I'm around. So if you want to do it that way, Samson, why, you've got a gun and I'm right here—"

There was still no fuss or flurry in his voice and nothing on his face but a kind of frozen, lifeless expression. He didn't threaten, he didn't shout. He just said, "I'm right here. You've got a gun and I'm right here."

The big man made up his mind. "Why, no, I don't want to hurt the boy bad," he said hastily. "I was just teachin' him a lesson, kind of. That's all I was doin', Bitts, just teachin' him a lesson. Maybe I kind of lost my temper—"

The pressure went off Lee's stomach as the big man got quickly to his feet.

"No hard feelins, Bitts," he said. "No hard feelins."

The wizened little man said nothing but he watched the big man with all the alert intentness of a wolf waiting to spring. And he stayed in the semi-crouch.

The big man backed away. He stepped up on the sidewalk. He went hastily into the general store.

The watchers unobtrusively faded out of the picture.

Lee Jones and his rescuer were left alone. The youth got slowly to his feet. His left eye was closing, some of his teeth felt like they were loose, and his cheeks were already beginning to swell.

"Thank you," he said, speaking from between puffy lips. "You saved me from a dangerous situation."

The wizened little man studied him thoughtfully. Whatever his thoughts were as he looked at this disheveled, battered youth, he kept them to himself.

"I heard you say you were Lee Jones, Old Nard's boy," he said. "Is that right?"

Lee nodded.

"Then you don't need to thank me," the little man said. "I'm Bitts Mason."

III

"BITTS MASON!" Lee Jones repeated. "Mr. Glisson mentioned you."

"You were coming from his office when you run into the girl?" Mason questioned. He seemed to take the answer for granted for he didn't wait for a reply. "What did he say about me?"

"He said you were one of the few friends my father had," Lee answered.

"Uh-huh," Mason said thoughtfully. "I guess he may be right at that."

"Who—who was that man who beat the devil out of me?" Lee asked.

"That? Samson Shute."

"Oh. Mr. Glisson mentioned him too."

"What did he say?"

"He said that Shute was one of the men in the game the night—the night my father was killed."

"Oh. So you know about that too." No emotion showed on the face of the lean, wizened little man.

"What—what was wrong with him? I didn't push that girl."

"I know you didn't. It was an accident. I saw it."

"But why did he act like that?"

Bitts Mason took his time before he answered. He seemed to look over the stock of words in his mind and carefully select the ones he wanted to use before he spoke.

"She's his kid," he said at last.

"But even so—"

"And she's not a girl."

"What?" Lee said.

"She's eighteen. And at eighteen

they're not girls in this country. They're women." Most of them are married by the time they're seventeen."

"Eighteen!" Lee gasped. "She's in pigtails! and hair ribbons and short skirts! You must be mistaken!"

"Im not mistaken," Bitts Mason said drily. "She's in pigtails because Samson makes her wear her hair that way. She wears short skirts and blouses because they're the only kind of clothes her daddy will buy for her."

"But why?" Lee Jones gasped.

"For the same reason he raised so much hell when you started talkin' to her. Hell, he didn't care so much because you knocked her down. It was your talking to her, your being nice to her, that made him mad. He won't let her even talk to a man, he won't buy her any grown-up clothes, because he's scared to death somebody is going to marry her and take her away from him."

LEE JONES stared in silence at this enigmatical little man. He did not doubt that Bitts Mason was speaking the truth. He remembered how roughly Samson Shute had ordered him to take his hands off the girl, he remembered her firm little breasts and rounded hips, incongruous in a child's clothes, he remembered the resentment that had blazed in her clear gray eyes when her father had curtly told her to go wait in the wagon, and how that resentment had been harshly over-ridden. He said nothing, but something of the way he felt must have showed on his face.

"It don't smell so good, huh?" Bitts Mason said, watching him. "Well, that's the way it is. That girl's got good stuff in her and old Samson is killing it. He's spoiling her whole life just to satisfy his own vanity. She needs friends, she needs to go to dances and parties and have herself a good time but he won't let her go. If I was a young buck, by Joseph, I'd give old Samson a taste of hot lead and see if I couldn't teach him how to treat that girl, by Joseph, I would."

In another man, this would have sounded like boasting, but the way Bitts Mason spoke the words, dry and calm and with no harshness or bitternes in his voice, you knew he meant exactly what he said. Then he changed the subject.

"Lee," he said, looking closely at the face of the youth. "We better get you to the doctor."

"I'm all right," Lee protested.

"Probably you are but it won't hurt anything to have a sawbones look you over. Old Doc Warson's office is just around the corner. We'll take you around and have him look you over. But first—" Subtly his voice changed. A new and brittle hardness crept into it. "Before you go anywhere with me, or are seen in my company, I want to know if you know about me."

"Only what Mr. Glisson told me, that you were one of my father's friends," Lee answered. He wondered why this enigmatical little man was hesitating.

"Old Nard ever write you about me, ever mention anything about me in his letters?" Mason questioned.

"I never had a letter from my father in my life," Lee Jones answered. "Mr. Glisson wrote the letters. They were all just alike."

"Huh?" Surprise showed on the face of Bitts Mason. "Old Nard never wrote to you once? What that old bastard, that old he-ram, treatin' his kid like that! Excuse me, Lee. I can call Old Nard names. Alive or dead, I can call him names. I'm one of the few who can. But I never knowed he was treatin' you like that."

This swift change of moods and of subjects was bewildering. "Probably he didn't know that I would—I would have liked to hear from him," Lee said.

"Huh? Well, it don't matter now. The important thing, Lee, is do you know anything about me?"

"Not a thing," the youth answered. "You weren't here when I left for school eight years ago. I never heard your name mentioned until an hour ago."

HE COULD not see where this conversation was leading. Why was it so important to Bitts Mason to know if he knew about the wizened little man?

Again Bitts Mason seemed to look inside his mind and sort over the words at his command, selecting exactly the ones he wanted to use before he spoke.

"The reason I wasn't here eight years ago, when you left, was because I was in the pen," Bitts Mason said.

"The what?" Lee Jones said.

"The penitentiary," Bitts Mason answered.

"Oh." The single gulped monosyllable revealed some of the shock that the words brought to Lee Jones. The penitentiary! This wizened little man was an ex-convict! Back in the cloistered world where Lee Jones had lived the most impressionable part of his life, a convict was definitely not considered a desirable person. Convicts were men who had violated the law and been put in prison for it. Convicts were outside the big high fence that surrounded the world where nice people lived.

Out here in this western country his father's best friend had been a convict!

Lee Jones was aware that Bitts Mason was watching his face like a hawk.

"I wanted you to know this before you had anything to do with me," Bitts Mason said. "I wanted you to have a chance to make up your mind about me. I'm not exactly a nice person. A fellow like you, who's been in college, may not want to have anything to do with me. If you say the word, I'll just kind of walk on down the street. I'll understand the way you feel, Lee, and there won't be hard feelings between us. Not any hard feelings at all."

Bitts Mason waited for an answer. Lee Jones stared at him. Was there hunger in the little man's eyes, a kind of yearning longing hidden behind the expressionless mask of his face? There was pride in the little man, he knew, a fierce hot pride, a pride so high and so strong that Bitts Mason would never sail under false colors. But was there hunger in him too, not belly hunger, but the hunger of a man for understanding and friendship?

Lee Jones didn't know about the hunger. But he knew what he was going to say.

"I think perhaps you are right about me needing to see a doctor," he said. "Will you take me to his office?"

He could see the muscles move in Bitts Mason's throat as the little man swallowed. But Mason was not finished.

"You didn't ask me why I was in the pen," he said.

"No. I didn't ask you," Lee Jones answered steadily.

"You think maybe you want to ask me?" Bitts Mason persisted.

"I think maybe it's your business," Lee Jones answered.

There was a sudden grin on the little man's face.

"By god, Lee!" Bitts Mason said. "You ain't got Old Nard's build, you ain't got his height or his bulk, but maybe you got his ability to make up his mind and keep it made up through thick and thin, and maybe you got his guts. Maybe you've got his guts, Lee, maybe you've got his guts. I kind of thought so when I saw you clip Samson on the jaw. Now I'm thinkin' so more than ever. Come on, Lee. Let's us go and hunt up that sawbones."

There was relish in the way he said, "Let's *us* go." He liked the sound of that word *us,* did this wizened little man who had been a convict and God alone knew what else. He liked that word. He thought it was a good word, one of the best.

Lee Jones suddenly discovered he liked the word too. He hadn't had many chances to use it in his life but he discovered there was a fine sound about it somewhere, a splendid heart-warming sound. Yes, it was a good word, that word us. It had a new meaning for him now, a meaning he had never known.

Bitts Mason tied the two horses in front of the general store.

The two men walked side by side down the board walk.

THEY turned the corner.

A spring wagon, its two horses munching grain from the rear, was sitting in a vacant lot.

A girl was sitting on the wagon seat. She looked like she had been crying.

She saw them coming. In a flurry of short skirts and flying pig-tails she leaped down from the wagon seat and ran toward them. Her eyes were fixed on the face of Lee Jones.

"Did my father do this?" she demanded, pointing to the puffed cheeks and the closing eye. "Did he do this to you? I'm so sorry, I'm so very, very sorry."

"It's all right," Lee answered. "It doesn't hurt a bit. It may look a little bad but it doesn't hurt. What's your name?"

"My name?" She looked as if this was an odd question, a question she had never had to answer before. "My name? My name is Helen. And I'm eighteen years old," she added, the words coming all in a rush, all in a hurry to get said.

Then she blushed and drew back.

"I'm Lee Jones," Lee said. "I'm very glad to meet you, Helen."

"Are you?" There was no coquetry in her voice but there was a sudden hungry pleasure.

"I certainly am," Lee said.

"Oh, your poor face. It must hurt terribly." She moved close to him again, dabbed at his bruises with a tiny handkerchief. The fragrance of her hair was like a subtle intoxicant.

"It doesn't hurt much," he answered. "Where do you live, Helen?"

"With my father, on the Circle C."

"Do you know where that is?" Lee Jones was speaking to Bitts Mason now. Mason, watching in silence, nodded in silence.

"Good." Lee turned back to the girl. "Do you ever go riding, Helen?"

She didn't understand. Bitts Mason understood but this girl in pig tails didn't begin to understand. "Why, yes. I ride. Everyone rides."

"Sometime, in the evening, do you ever ride out—" Lee hesitated, not knowing what to say.

Bitts Mason, who understood perfectly and knew the country, knew what to say.

"Towards the Red Mesa," Mason interposed.

"If you ride out towards the Red Mesa a week from today, Helen, I think we'll just happen to be in that neighborhood, and we'll ride together."

"Oh!" She understood then. This slender man with the bruised face, he was asking her to go riding with him. She blushed furiously.

"I couldn't do that," she said hastily.

"Why not?" Lee Jones asked.

"I'm not supposed to talk to men. I'm not even supposed to tell men my name."

"But you'll go riding with me? Bitts Mason will chaperon us."

Her eyes were alive with dancing lights.

"I'll be there," she said.

"Good!" Lee Jones said. "I'll be looking forward to it. Where—"

But she had skipped quickly across the sidewalk and was already climbing back into the spring wagon. Turning, Lee saw what had frightened her.

Samson Shute had come around the corner.

The two men walked quietly away.

"You're gonna need old Nard's guts," Bitts Mason softly said.

CHAPTER IV

WHEN Lee Jones awakened the next morning, the soft sputter of popping grease was in his ears and the fragrance of frying bacon was in his nostrils. He sat up abruptly and for a second he wondered where he was. What was he doing here in the top section of this double-deck bunk? How had he gotten here to this clean little cabin with the bright sunlight flowing through the back window? Who was that wizened little man frying bacon over that wood-burning stove?

Then the little man glanced up, saw he was awake, and cheerfully called out: "Mawning, Lee. How's your face feel this morning?"

And Lee remembered where he was. He had ridden most of the night reaching this little cabin that belonged to Bitts Mason. He felt of his bandaged face and smiled ruefully.

"My left eye feels like it is still closed," he said.

"Well, you can still grin anyhow," Bitts Mason answered. "Climb out of there and wash up. Hot water here in the teakettle. Wash pan out on the back porch. Git a move on lad. I'm going to start these flap jacks right now and when they're ready, they've got to be eaten. They ain't any good after they get cold."

As he spoke, Bitts lifted the last piece of bacon out of the pan and began to pour a thick creamy liquid into the popping grease. Lee slid to the floor, pulled on his shoes and socks, slipped into his pants.

"We're gonna have to git you some ridin' clothes," Bitts said. "Those may be all right back east but the fellow who wears 'em out here is automatically a dude. You'll need some high-heeled boots too. Otherwise your foot might slip through the stirrup some day just when you needed it most and you'll find yourself being drug by a runaway horse."

Lee nodded. "I'll put them on after breakfast," he said.

Bitts stared somberly at him. "You'll put 'em on after breakfast?" he said.

Lee grinned and pointed to his bags. "I've got them in there."

Mason's amazement showed on his face.

"I've had a New York tailor make me a pair of breeches every year," Lee said. "And a bookmaker make me a new pair of boots every time I outgrew the old pair. I've never had a chance to wear any of them but I had them ready so that if my—if ever he thought I should come home during vacation—" He stumbled through the words, trying to say the right thing.

"Only Old Nard never thought you ought to come home during vacation," Mason said drily.

"Well, that was sort of it," Lee answered lamely. "I kind of hoped he would, sometime. And I had my clothes ready, if he ever did. But he didn't."

Bitts Mason poured another flapjack into the skillet. "I told Old Nard he was being nine different kinds of a fool," he said. "Wasn't a day passed he didn't wish you were here. But the old fool wouldn't send for you because he was bound and determined you were going to get the best education there was. He was afraid if he brought you back here you might not want to go back to school. The old goat!" He poked savagely at the fire.

LEE took the teakettle from the stove, went quickly to the back porch. He got cold water from the little pump, poured hot water from the kettle, soaped his hands and dabbed at the part of his face not covered by a bandage. When he came back into the kitchen, Bitts looked closely at him but the exposed portion of his face revealed none of the sudden elation he had felt when he learned that not a day had passed without his father wishing he was home.

After breakfast, Mason said:

"Come out to the corral. I got something to show you."

Lee had already changed clothes. Mason had silently inspected the eastern-made boots and riding breeches. The boots met with his approval. They were solidly made on a western last. About the breeches he said nothing. When Lee followed him out of the cabin, he went to a lean-to on one side of the little log building and took a heavily-ornamented western saddle from a peg. Swinging the saddle over his shoulder, he walked down to the corral.

Three horses were in the pole enclosure, the two they had ridden the night before and a big rangy bay. Bitts Mason loosened the rope from the horn of the saddle he was carrying. For the first time, Lee noticed that Mason's right hand was a little crooked and stiff. But in spite of the stiffness, he handled the rope with smooth dexterity. The big bay snorted and tried to hide behind the other two horses but when the loop settled around his neck, he came docilely enough. Mason bridled and saddled him.

"There he is, Lee," he said. "He's all yours."

"Mine?" Lee questioned.

"Yeah. He belonged to Old Nard. I brought him out here to save him for you."

"Oh."

"He may not look so fancy," Mason slowly said. "But he's all horse. You can ride him from hell to sundown and then on to breakfast. That's the only kind of horse Old Nard would own. He may buck and kick up his heels a little now and then, when he's fresh, but when you want speed, he's got it. When you want stay, he's got that too. The saddle is yours, too, Lee. You still remember how to ride, or did you ever learn?"

"Until I was twelve, I practically lived in the saddle," the youth answered.

Mason swung the pole gate open and Lee Jones hooked his left foot in the stirrup and swung lightly into the saddle. The big bay snorted when he felt the weight of the rider on his back, then he was through the open gate with a lunge.

Freely flowing power, speed, and an easy seat, these the big bay had. He lunged into a gallop and then into a wide open run that was all smoothly-flowing speed. He had been in the corral for over a week, had this horse, and he wanted to go. The man in the saddle had been in the corral for eight years and he wanted to go too. They went together.

And Lee Jones discovered something he had been missing, something he had needed very badly, something he had wanted for years and hadn't had. This was it. A horse that was all power and go, a horse that ran like the wind, a horse that surged with power. From the time he was old enough to ride a pony until he was twelve years old, he had been almost constantly in the saddle, riding with his father, riding with the hands on the Bar Y. Then abruptly he had been hastened off to school and he hadn't even seen a horse in all those years. This was what he wanted, this was what something inside of him needed.

"Yipee! Yipee-yi-yo!" The old cowboy yell came naturally to his lips. "Yipee-yi-yo!" In pure exultation, he yelled at the top of his lungs.

Born and bred in the saddle, he had not forgotten how to ride.

He had a horse between his legs.

Something inside of him had desperately needed a horse.

"Yipee-yi-yo!"

When that exultant yell come floating back to Bitts Mason, waiting beside the pole corral, a grin came to the face of the wizened little man. He knew what it meant to yell like that, knew exactly.

"That's Old Nard's boy," he thought. And the grin grew.

Then the grin vanished as he saw the four horsemen come over the rise and move leisurely toward him. For a moment, he watched them from slitted eyes. Then he turned and walked swiftly back to the cabin.

LEE JONES, letting the bay run, did not see the four horsemen until they were almost to the cabin. When he saw them, there was something about them that held his attention. They rode like men who knew exactly where they were going. Turning the head of the bay, he let the big beast thunder back to the cabin.

The four men had stopped in front of the cabin. They were sitting easily on their mounts. Bitts Mason was lounging easily in the front door. A Winchester, its muzzle pointed toward the ground, was tucked nonchalantly under his right arm.

The four men looked at Lee as he rode up.

"Hello," he said.

They nodded.

He glanced at Mason.

"Do we have guests?"

"Sort of," Mason drawled.

The four men sat in silence. The slight movements of the horses was the only sound. Lee could hear the big bay breathing easily after his run. The horse pulled at the bridle urging his rider to run some more. Lee held him in check. Bitts Mason lounged in the door of the cabin. The Winchester was not pointing at anybody but the four men seemed very much aware of the existence of the rifle.

"Who is this?" one of them spoke, pointing to Lee. He had a tiny mustache and his face, under the brim of his expensive broad-brimmed hat, was white and pinched.

"Him?" Mason said. "Oh. He's Lee Jones."

Lee was aware that four pairs of eyes were fixed on him the instant his name was spoken.

The lips of the man with the mustache formed a silent, "Oh. Son of—son of—" He couldn't remember the name.

"Old Nard," Bitts Mason answered. "You've probably heard of him." His voice was dry and quiet.

The mustache nodded. He probed Lee Jones with his eyes, weighed the youth, sought for his stature as a man.

"The one with the mustache is Holmes," Bitts Mason spoke suddenly. "Richard Holmes. The one with the bandages around his left shoulder is Harley Fox. The other two I haven't met."

Holmes nodded curtly. He made no move to introduce the other two men.

"Harley, there," Mason spoke again. "Harley Fox. You see that bandage, Lee? That's where Old Nard nicked him. Old Nard's aim was a little off that night, like maybe somebody jiggled his arm just as he pulled trigger."

Mason's voice was still dry and calm. The instant he heard the names, Lee Jones remembered that Glisson had told him about these two men. Samson Shute had been the other man in the game with his father that night. He had already met Samson. Now he was meeting Holmes and Fox. Rather, they had ridden over to talk to Bitts Mason. They might or might not have known that Lee was there.

LEE sat in silence in the saddle and looked at the two men. Their faces were as expressionless, as emotionless as his own. But Fox, who had been holding the reins in his right hand, slowly and unobtrusively changed them over to the left. He winced a little from the pain in his wounded left shoulder but he took the reins in his left hand just the same. That way his right hand would be free to reach for the nickel-plated gun holstered at his hip.

The other two men were silent. Their faces brown and impassive they looked like hooded killers. One of them was slowly rolling a cigarette. They looked at Lee with little side-long glances of their eyes.

Holmes finished his scrutiny. His shoulders moved in a little shrug which said, "So you're Lee Jones? So what?" He shifted his gaze to the man standing in the door.

"I came over to see you about this cabin, Mason," he said.

"So you're seeing me," Bitts Mason said.

"This cabin is part of the Bar Y," Holmes said. "It's my property. I'm expecting you to vacate it. I want to use it as a line camp."

His words were clipped and short. The accent was eastern. Lee remembered that Glisson had said this man was an eastern financier seeking to invest in ranch property.

Standing in the doorway of the cabin, Bitts Mason did not move. If the muzzle of the rifle lifted an inch or two, the movement was purely instinctive.

"This cabin is not part of the Bar Y," he said.

"No?" Holmes answered.

"No," Mason answered. "Old Nard gave it to me, the cabin and the hundred and sixty acres surrounding it."

"He did?" Holmes seemed surprised. "Do you have a deed?"

"Uh-huh."

"You do? May I see it?"

"You're looking at it," Mason quietly answered.

For a moment, Holmes did not understand. Only when Mason patted the barrel of the rifle and slowly drawled, "This is my deed," did he realize what the wizened little man meant.

His eyes narrowed. "I see," he said. "I question whether the courts will recognize such an instrument as legal."

"Out in this country, they've been recognizing them for a long time," Mason answered.

"I suppose you've got the same kind of deed for those Double Bar Y cattle my men tell me are in this vicinity?" Holmes said.

"Those cows were part of my regular pay," Mason answered. "I got about two hundred head. They were Bar Y cows to begin with. We added an extra bar so we would know what was mine and what wasn't. You'll find the brand is registered."

Holmes was silent. He seemed to be making up his mind what to do next.

He had three men with him. That made four against one man with a rifle and an unarmed youth. Four to one. Those were excellent odds.

Holmes hesitated. He knew the odds were in his favor but he did not like the looks of that rifle. He had the shrewd hunch that the first bullet from that blue barrel would be aimed at him. Of course his men would get the little man with the gun but what good would that be to him if he had a rifle slug in his heart? He hesitated, pulled his reins.

"I've warned you, Mason," he said. "This is my property and I'm expecting you to vacate it. And it's mighty easy to convert a Bar Y brand to a Double Bar Y. If I find any freshly branded Double Bar stock, I'm going to take immediate action. Come on, men."

FOLLOWING Holmes, the men rode slowly away. Harley Fox kept looking back over his shoulder watching the little man standing nonchalantly in the cabin door.

Lee Jones slid hastily from the saddle. He took a deep breath.

"Whew, Bitts," he whistled. "I thought they were going to start shooting at any minute."

Bitts Mason kicked at the doorstep with the toe of his worn boot. "Naw," he said. "Holmes is yellow. Coming out in the open is not his way. He'd rather pay somebody to sneak up in the dark and do his dirty work. Come in the cabin, Lee. I've got something I want to give you and something I want to tell you."

Following Mason into the cabin, Lee Jones saw him go to a wooden chest and open it. From it he took a worn leather holster and belt and a big blue-steel pistol with worn walnut butts.

"I gave you Old Nard's horse and I gave you his saddle," Bitts Mason said. "This is the last thing I've got to give you—his gun."

He put the weapon in the youth's hands.

The leather of the belt and the holster was soft and worn and warm. The barrel of the gun was smooth and cool. The weapon was big and heavy with the feel of death.

While Bitts Mason watched him, Lee Jones ran his fingers over the gun, feeling it, sensing it, letting its cool deadliness flow into his hands and into his soul.

He remembered this gun. It had been a big black question mark hanging ever-ready at the hip of his father.

It was still a question mark, but it was in his hands now.

Bitts Mason took two boxes of cartridges from the chest.

"Come on outside and start learning how to shoot it," he said, "while I tell you about a poker game."

CHAPTER V

THE big pistol exploded in Lee's hand. A small hole appeared on the wrapping paper target backed against two heavy boards. The target had a two-inch bullseye of black paint. The distance was fifty feet.

"High and to the right," Bitts Mason said, squinting. "You're still pulling the trigger just a little instead of squeezing it."

Lee lifted the catch, broke the barrel, and removed the empty shells. While he was replacing them with fresh cartridges from the half-empty box, Bitts Mason continued the conversation. He was talking about a poker game. At the same time he was telling Lee how to hold the gun, how to let it rock in the hand, how to pull the trigger, and how to aim.

"They were playin' draw poker,"

Bitts Mason said. "You know anything about poker, Lee?"

"Very little," the youth answered.

"Well, it's not like any other game on earth. It's not a game of cards, it's a game of men. You don't play with the cards you hold against the cards the other man holds. You play your judgment and your guts against his judgment and his guts. You can win on a pair of deuces, if your judgment is right and your guts are strong. And you can lose on three aces, if your guts fold up on you and you don't call. It's a game that gets in your blood, Lee. And it was in Old Nard's blood that night."

Mason paused and looked thoughtfully at the far horizon. Off there in the far distance a buzzard was circling on lazy wings against the soft wind.

"Stakes had been high and play had been fast," Mason continued. "Old Nard had won thousands and lost thousands. There was big money floating loose in that game. Even old Samson Shute was playin' 'em high, wide, and handsome. Old Samson may be a mean old bastard so far as his kid is concerned, but when it comes to playin' poker, he's better than a raw hand."

Boom! went the gun.

The circle was lower down this time but it was still to the right.

"Then the cards started runnin' against Old Nard," Mason continued. "Cards are like that. They run good for a little while. Then they run bad for a long time. Then the big hand comes along and you win back all you've lost and maybe more."

The gun exploded again. The bullet hole was even with the bullseye but still to the right.

"That's a good shot," Mason said. "That'll wing a man." He pushed his hat back on his head and nodded.

"Old Nard was about twenty thousand dollars behind when the big hand came along. And he was sweatin' plenty. Twenty thousand was big money to him. If he wound up that much loser, he was going to have to let go of a mighty lot of stock to pay off, a mighty lot. He was going to have to pinch and save plenty if he lost that much. So he was sweatin'. Then he picked up his hand as it was dealt and he had four queens and a king. They piled a powerful lot of money in that pot before the draw was made."

Mason paused. "Shute got out early. So did Fox, who was dealing. Holmes stuck. He was big winner, the cards were running for him, he was playing on their money, so he stuck, though Old Nard, with his four queens and a king, made the sticking plenty expensive. Then they drew cards. Old Nard threw away his worthless king and drew one card. That card was an ace. Holmes drew two cards."

Mason's voice was quiet and dry. But the tang in his words showed that he was reliving this situation. "They were playin' in the back room of the Three Star saloon, in Walden. I was sittin' up front, waitin' to ride home with Old Nard when the game was finished. All I know about the hand is what Old Nard told me as he died."

Crash! went the pistol.

THE black spot on the target was within inches of the bullseye this time.

"You see the set-up, Lee. Old Nard had four queens. A straight flush would beat him, four kings would beat him, four aces would beat him. But—it wasn't possible for Holmes to hold four kings or four aces because Nard had thrown away one king and he had caught an ace, which meant that the two sets of fours which would beat his four queens were not possible. Holmes had drawn two cards. He might have three kings, he might have three aces, he might have three of something else, but he didn't have four kings, he didn't have four aces, and he couldn't draw them."

Lee Jones said nothing. He let the big gun rock gently in his hand and smoothly squeezed the trigger.

"After the draw, Holmes started bettin' his head off. Old Nard figured he had made a full house, maybe with aces or kings up, or he had made a small set of fours. Either way, Old Nard's four queens were the killers. And when Holmes shoved a check for fifty thousand dollars into the pot, Old Nard matched him with a quit-claim deed to the Bar Y.

"Old Nard was reachin' for the pot when Holmes showed his hand. He didn't have a full house, he didn't have a small set of fours. He had a straight flush, the six, seven, eight, nine, ten of diamonds. *Paying better than six thousand dollars for the privilege, he had drawn the two case cards to a straight flush.*"

"I'm afraid I don't quite understand that," Lee Jones said.

"It's this way, Lee," Mason carefully explained. "A good poker player never draws two cards to any kind of a flush. The odds are too big against hitting the two cards you need. And no poker player ever pays six thousand dollars to draw to a straight flush, *not unless he knows in advance what cards he is going to catch!*"

"Oh," Lee said.

"So Old Nard knew he had been caught in a crooked deal," Mason said. "And as Holmes spread his cards, he remembered something he had noticed but had forgotten in the excitement of the play, that he thought he had seen Harley Fox, who had dealt the cards, deal seconds on this hand. He knew he had been cheated, he knew who had done it. He reached for his gun. Holmes grabbed his arm and Fox shot him through the head. He died in my arms and as he died, he told me what had happened.

Mason's voice ran off into dry silence. Old Nard Jones had been his friend for more years than he could remember, his friend through thick and thin, a friend who never asked whether he was right or wrong but took his side just the same. His friend had died in his arms and the memory of it was a bitter canker eating at his heart.

Boom! went the big pistol Lee Jones was holding.

Bitts Mason squinted at the target. "You got it dead center that time, Lee," he said.

Lee reloaded the pistol. The gun rocked in his hand as he fired six shots as fast as he could work the mechanism. Two of the bullets went into the black paint at the center of the target. The other four shots were grouped closely around it. No bullet was more than three inches away.

"You've got a knack with a gun," Bitts Mason said. "That's better shooting than I can do or ever could."

"I was thinking that black paint was maybe a patch on Holmes' vest," the youth answered.

MASON looked quickly at him, saw how his face had darkened.

"If you shoot better when you're shooting at a man you hate, then you've got the makings of a killer," Mason said.

"I don't want to be a killer," Lee Jones answered. "I did not seek this fight."

"Nobody wants to be a killer, Lee," Bitts Mason said. "But there are times in this country when you've got to kill or be killed. Probably it's different back east. They've got law back there, and order, and they do things different than we do. But we haven't got much law out here yet. Every man makes his own law according to the way he feels about it. There comes a time when you've got to fight whether you want to or not and there may come a time when you have to kill somebody, whether you want to or not. That may not be nice, it may not be pretty, it may not be the way we'd do things if we had the say, but that's the way it is."

"I have accepted that fact," the youth answered. "What about Samson Shute? He was in the game too."

"At the inquest, Samson said he had seen nothing wrong with the deal. Holmes and Fox, of course, testified that the deal was honest. That was all there was to it, since the only man who knew it wasn't honest wasn't able to testify. Samson's a mean old bastard who ought to have a little common decency kicked into his worthless carcass, but he's fairly honest, according to his lights. Shoot up the rest of the shells, Lee; I'll go into the cabin and get some more. Then I want to show you how to draw and shoot a gun."

The training that Lee Jones got that day was arduous. Bitts Mason seemed to feel it was urgently important for him to learn how to shoot and to learn quickly. From the way Mason acted, there wasn't much time left in the world to master the art of handling a gun. He was a hard taskmaster. Nothing short of the best that could be done would suit him.

When Bitts began to teach him how to draw and shoot with a single motion, Lee got an answer to a question that had been bothering him! If Bitts was a real friend of his father, why hadn't he done something about Holmes and Fox the night his father had been killed?

"You do it like this, Lee," Bitts Mason said. He had dropped into a semi-crouch. From that position the gun holstered at his hip was drawn with flashing speed. It was pulled clear of the holster almost faster than the eye could follow. But when the gun was free, Bitts couldn't lift it. He had to reach over with his left hand and grasp his right wrist before he could bring up the gun.

"I busted my right wrist a couple of years ago," Mason said. "It wasn't set right. Since then I haven't had any leverage in the arm. I can pull with it but I can't lift."

"I see," Lee Jones said. "I'm glad you told me. Frankly, I had wondered—"

The look on his face showed what he had been wondering about.

"I don't blame you," Mason answered. "No, I wouldn't have let the men who killed Old Nard walk off if there had been much I could have done about it. I would have just got myself killed without gaining anything. No, I had to wait for you, Lee, to do the job I couldn't do."

FOR the first time since Lee Jones had first met the wizened little man, he heard harsh bitterness in his voice. For Bitts Mason, the knowledge that his friend had been killed and he couldn't do anything about it was bitter medicine indeed and the thought of it was vitriol to his soul.

"I was a gunman once," Bitts Mason said. "I held my own with all the ramrods that rode the trail. Not that I ever looked for trouble. No man who's got any sense ever does that. But if trouble came my way I could meet it. I've still got a reputation. Samson Shute was scared of what I used to be when he let me bluff him off of you. He was just a little afraid I might still be able to do what I once could do. So he backed out. But the man who tackles Holmes and Fox is not going to get by on his reputation. He's going to have to produce the goods. That fellow Holmes may be an eastern capitalist. I doubt it, but he may be. But that guy Harley Fox is a killer if I ever saw one. And I've seen several in my day. No, Lee, I couldn't do it alone. I had to wait for you. Of course, I'm going with you—"

"Um," Lee Jones questioned quietly. "We're going over to see Holmes and Fox?"

"One of these days, we are," Bitts Mason answered. "One of these days. Now I want you to practice and keep on practicing. I want you to shoot that gun morning, noon and night. I want you to shoot at rocks and prairie dogs and tin cans. Every time you hear a noise, I want you to practice pulling that gun and letting go."

The practice continued. As Bitts Mason had commented, Lee Jones had a natural knack with a gun. He could lift the weapon from the leather with flashing speed, and shoot, and hit his target.

Yes, Lee could hit a target. But Bitts Mason, out of the depth of his grim experience, knew there was a tremendous difference between shooting at a target and shooting at a man who was shooting back at you. One was fairly easy. Anybody could learn to shoot a gun. But to shoot that gun at a man took guts, Bitts' kind of guts, Old Nard's kind of guts, the guts of a westerner.

There was no way of knowing in advance whether a man had that kind of guts.

Did Old Nard's son have the kind of guts it took to get the job done?

Bitts Mason didn't know. With sombre, worried eyes he watched the youth practice.

And he waited.

Lee Jones practiced and waited. He became accustomed to the feel of the cartridge-filled belt around his waist, to the weight of the gun in its holster. Three days passed. During those days he was either shooting or riding. Saddle soreness came. Long unused muscles, adjusting again to the requirements of riding, stiffened for a day, then swiftly limbered up again. He and Bitts Mason rode over the surrounding hills, through the long valleys. They rode once to the top of a mountain. From this height, shimmering in the haze of the distance, they could see the sprawling ranch house of the Bar Y. Dots on the high plain were grazing cattle. They stared at the ranch for a long time, then turned their horses and rode away.

Each day as they rode they were aware of a rider in the distance. They never caught more than a glimpse of the man and he never came close to them.

"Somebody is keeping an eye on us," Bitts Mason said. "Likely it's one of the new riders for the Bar Y. Holmes paid off every man who had worked for your father and sent them packing. He brought in a whole new crew."

"Why would they be watching us?" Lee questioned.

"Because they're scared of us," Mason answered. "As long as we're alive, Holmes won't feel safe on the Bar Y."

IT WAS April in this country. The high sky was flecked with clouds and showers fell intermittently. Grass was popping out of the ground everywhere. The cattle were growing fat. Later, in the heat of summer, this grass would rapidly head out, and the ripened, succulent heads and stems would provide even better grazing. Often, on their rides, they saw Bar Y cattle. Occasionally they saw some with the double bar. Always, from some far-off ridge, the lone rider dogged their footsteps. They rode once to the Red Mesa, so Lee would know how to find it.

At night they came back to the cabin. Lee always climbed quickly into his bunk and sank soon into the deep sleep of the physically weary. Each night as he went to sleep, he was aware of Bitts Mason sitting in front of the open window, the Winchester cupped across his knees. Each morning when he awakened, the wizened little man was still there, guns across his lap, nodding in the comfortable chair. Lee asked no questions. He figured Bitts Mason knew what he was doing. The wizened little man volunteered no information. He watched and waited for what he knew was coming.

When it came it was in a form that even Bitts Mason had not anticipated.

Lee Jones awakened one night to the sound of a running horse.

He sat up in bed.

Bitts Mason was crouched at the window, the muzzle of the rifle resting on the window sill.

Outside, in the moonlit night, a horse was running.

"What is it?" Lee questioned.

"I don't know," the little man whispered.

The running horse slowed to a gallop, then to a walk.

"Hello," a voice called in the night. "Hello, the cabin."

At the sound of that voice Lee Jones slid hastily down from the bunk and jerked on trousers and boots. Bitts Mason stood up and walked to the door. Footsteps sounded just outside. The rider had dismounted.

Mason hastily opened the door.

"Are you there, Mr. Mason?" a girl's voice faltered. "Is that you?"

"It's me all right," Mason answered. "Come on in."

Lee Jones could not recognize her but he knew by the sound of her voice that Helen Shute had come into the cabin.

"What is it, Miss Helen?" Bitts Mason was whispering. "What is it you want, girl, at this hour of the night?"

CHAPTER VI

HELEN SHUTE tried to see into the darkness of the cabin. Bitts Mason had not lit the lamp, nor did he show any signs of lighting it.

"Is—I heard Lee Jones was here with you, Mr. Mason," she whispered. "Is—is that right?"

"That's right, Helen," Lee Jones answered for himself.

"What is it you want?" Bitts Mason whispered in the darkness.

"Oh. I—" She didn't seem to know exactly what to say. Helen Shute had been taught to fear and hate men. The fact that she was alone in a cabin with two men seemed suddenly to have impressed itself on her.

"Would you feel better if we had a light?" Lee Jones questioned.

"No," she quickly answered. "They might see it."

"They?" Bitts Mason asked. He was sticking to the point: What had brought this eighteen-year old girl here in the night?

"That's what I came to tell you," she spoke hastily. Her fear had left her. For a moment she had been afraid, but that was gone now. The words tripped over themselves in her anxiety to speak. "I heard them talking. I was listening under the window and I heard them talking, planning what they were going to do. That Holmes man, Holmes and Fox, they came to see daddy this afternoon. They stayed for supper. After supper, they talked to daddy. I heard them tell daddy how Mr. Mason had re-branded Bar Y cows into Double Bar Y. Daddy was pretty mad about that. He hates a rustler."

"Um," Bitts Mason said. "What did they want to do?"

"They wanted daddy to take two or three men he could trust and they would bring two or three of their men and come—come over here and—hang Mr. Mason."

"I see." The wizened little man's voice was harsh and bitter in the dark cabin.

"They said — they said a rustler ought not to be left alive and that they thought daddy ought to help them do something about it."

"Did he agree?"

"No," Helen Shute was breathless. "At first, that is, he wouldn't agree with them. I think maybe he didn't quite believe them. So he wouldn't come with them."

"Then they're coming alone?" Bitts Mason said.

"No. Daddy is with them."

"But you said—"

"That was when they were telling him that Mr. Mason was a rustler. He wouldn't go with them just for that reason. Then—then they told him that Lee— that Lee and I had been seen riding together. They told him a lie—"

"And he believed it," Mason said.

"Y—yes." She was close to tears now. Her voice was fluttery with the surge of repressed emotions. She was all mixed up inside, mixed up and confused. So many things had been wrong in her life that she was never sure when she did a right thing. Coming here and warning Bitts Mason and Lee Jones had seemed right, but her father would think it was wrong. What would he say when he learned about it? What would he do?

HE HADN'T whipped her in over a year now, but he still threatened to. When he learned what she had done, he would whip her again. The fear of that whipping showed in the catch in her voice.

"So they're coming after us?" Bitts Mason said.

"Y—yes," the girl whispered. "L—listen!"

Both Bitts Mason and Lee Jones had already heard the sound brought on the vagary of the night wind—the distant drumming of running horses. And Bitts Mason was across the cabin yanking a Winchester from the wall, fiercely whispering to Lee to fill his pockets with cartridges and buckle his pistol on.

Lee Jones was buckling the gun belt around his waist, making sure that the gun was loaded, and that the loops in the belt were filled. He was scooping extra cartridges for the rifle into all his pockets. And Helen Shute was fiercely whispering.

"Please—"

"What is it, Miss Helen?"

"Don't p—don't shoot daddy," the girl begged.

"We're not going to shoot anybody," the little man answered. "Not if we can keep from it. There are eight or ten horses coming out there. We're going to run. You get on your horse and get out of here. Lee, shake a leg and let's get down to the corral and get saddles on our horses and get moving."

Rifle tucked under his arm, he was out the back door before he had finished speaking. Lee hesitated.

"I'll see you to your horse, Helen," he said. "And thank you for warning us. That warning is going to make more difference than you know."

"Do—you think I did right?"

"You did the rightest thing that ever

was done," he firmly answered.

He held the stirrup for her and she swung into the saddle.

"Goodbye, Helen. I'll still meet you at the Red Mesa at the time we agreed on."

Rifle in his right hand, he turned and ran toward the corral. She sat on her horse looking after him. Off in the night the drumming of running horses was coming closer.

The had saddled and bridled their horses and were swinging into the saddle when she came riding up.

"I'm going with you," she said. "I'm not going back home. I'm going with you."

Under his breath, Lee could hear Bitts Mason swearing.

"Let her go with us, Bitts," he urged.

"I won't be in the way a bit," the girl begged. "I can ride like everything. I'll keep up with you."

"We can't stay here anyhow," the little man raged. "And since you're here, you might as well come with us. But when Samson learns you're with us, I'd a darned sight rather have the Apaches after me than him. He'll be fit to be tied. But come on."

Giving his mount the spur, he rode away. They followed.

THEY were less than half a mile away when the horsemen swept up to the house and the guns began to roar. They rode straight up to the cabin and began shooting through the doors and windows.

The bark of the guns was a continuous rattling thunder, a blatting roar of sound.

"If we'd a-been asleep in there," Bitts Mason said, listening to the fusillade. "They'd have cooked our goose before we even woke up."

"Is that why you kept watch every night?" Lee Jones questioned.

"I was looking out for a dry-gulcher," the little man explained. "I was expecting a single man, or at most two men, with shotguns loaded with buckshot, to come sneakin' up to the cabin and slip the barrel over the window and shoot us in bed. I wasn't expecting any army like this to come charging down on us. I guess they were a little scared to shoot us in cold blood. After all, I've got a few friends who might ask some embarrassing questions. That's why they brought Samson in on the killing, so they could say I was rustlin' and you had been monkeying with his girl."

He shook his head and rode slowly on.

By the time they reached the top of a nearby hill, the gunfire had stopped. Looking back, they saw why it had stopped.

"They're burning the cabin," Helen Shute whispered, fear and terror mingled in her voice.

Bright tongues of flame were already reaching up into the night. Outlined against the fire, they could see riders slowly moving around the burning building.

"God damn 'em!" Bitts Mason said. "Excuse me, Miss Helen, but I've got to say it. *God damn 'em!* I've seen 'em burn out nesters like this, and I've seen the cattlemen burn out sheep camps, and I've seen the sheepmen burn down line camps in revenge, but I never expected to see anybody burn me out. God damn 'em!"

The little man was shaking with furious rage. This was his home that was being burned, his place of refuge. He was getting on in years, he had reached the time of life when a snug little cabin, warm in winter and cool in summer, was not only pleasant but necessary. This cabin was all he had in the world.

It was all Lee Jones could do to keep the enraged little man from riding back down to the burning building, from charging into the circling riders.

"Take it easy, Bitts," he argued. "It's only a cabin."

"You can say that," the little man bitterly answered. "You're young."

"We'll build it back, Bitts," Lee said. "You and I. And we'll have forty men to help us."

"If we live that long!" the little man snarled. He turned his horse and rode slowly and despondently away. His fierce rage seemed to have burned the spirit out of him. Intuitively Lee realized that most of the heart was gone out of the little man. He was like a badly wounded dog looking for a place to crawl away and die.

LEE also intuitively realized he could no longer look to Bitts Mason for leadership. He had been letting the little man tell him what to do and how to do it. Now he knew he would have to make the decisions himself.

"I'm sorry my daddy was one of those men," Helen Shute whispered to the silent and thoughtful youth.

"Do you love him?" he questioned.

"Yes," she answered, her voice very low. Then rage flared in her. "And I hate him. I love him but sometimes I could—sometimes I could kill him with my own bare hands."

She began to cry.

"I'm all mixed up inside, Lee," she sobbed. "I don't know whether I love him or whether I hate him. Sometimes it's one and sometimes it's the other. I'm so mixed up."

"You'll feel better by and by," he soothed. "I know how you feel."

The memory of his own mixed emotions toward his own father was strong in him. He had hated Old Nard, because Old Nard made him stay in that eastern school away from the country he loved, because Old Nard had never written to him. These things were cause for hate. Yet he knew his father had only been doing the very best he knew how to do. And if Old Nard had muffled his relationship with his son, it had not been because that was what Old Nard wanted to do but because that was all he knew how to do.

"Our fathers mix us up, Helen," he said. "That's too bad but that seems usually to be the way it is."

"But he doesn't have to treat me the way he does!" Helen Shute blazed. "He could be nice to me, he could let me have pretty clothes, he could let me go to dances. And I know—I know—if he ever finds out I've been here tonight, he'll—he'll try to whip me again."

Her voice broke into uncontrolled sobs.

"Whip you?" Lee Jones gasped. "Does he do that?"

"Y—yes. Sometimes."

The youth took a deep breath. "I'm sorry, Helen. Somehow I don't think he'll do it any more."

"W—what makes you say that?"

"No reason," he answered. "I just don't think he will, that's all. I don't think he will."

"I *hope* not," the girl whispered.

Following Bitts Mason, they rode side by side. The April moon was high over New Mexico, high behind broken clouds, so that now it revealed the vast sweep of rolling country, and now concealed it, as the clouds passed. A warm wind was blowing up from the south, tugging at them with invisible fingers, touching them with nameless impulses old as the race is old.

In so beautiful a night, it was hard to realize that back there a few miles away armed men were riding rapidly away from a burning cabin.

THE moon had passed the zenith and was halfway down the western sky when they reached the ranch where Helen Shute lived. Topping a low hill, the ranch house was suddenly directly below them. It sat in a flat little valley enclosed on three sides by hills.

The big house was blazing with lights when they reached it. Lights were burning in the bunkhouse. Lanterns were moving around the buildings.

"Goodness! What's going on?" the girl wondered aloud.

As if in answer to her question, a voice below them shouted: "Her horse and her saddle are gone."

"They've discovered that you're missing," Lee said. "They're looking for you."

"Oh." Her voice was the faintest whisper of sound in the darkness. "They—they know I'm gone. What—what are we going to do?"

Lee said nothing. He had planned to take Helen home, then he and Bitts would slip away. He had already planned their next move—to go to the Bar Y the next night and face Holmes and Fox. Or at least he had been considering this move. When they had burned the cabin, they had brought the fight into the open. It was war. Possibly their best move would be to strike directly into the stronghold of the enemy.

Sitting on his horse and looking at the activity below them, Bitts Mason was slowly shaking his head.

"Only thing I can say is for you to ride on down there," Mason said . . .

"No," the girl protested.

"They won't hurt you," Mason said. "Old Samson may raise the roof but he won't hurt you."

She was silent but Lee knew what she wanted to say.

"I agree with Helen," he said.

"Why?" Bitts Mason challenged. "That's where she belongs, that's where she ought to be. That's her home. Her old man is there, or soon will be."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Lee answered.

"Afraid of? Why?"

"Samson will whip her," Lee said.

"Huh?" For a moment, the wizened little man seemed dazed at the thought. Whipping an eighteen-year old woman was not a part of his knowledge of life. He had difficulty in believing that such a thing could happen. But even after he believed it, he could not see what difference it made.

"Whipping or no whipping," he said. "She's got to go home."

"No," Lee Jones said. "We'll take her to Walden. She can stay in the hotel there until we have a chance to reason with Samson."

"Thank you, Lee," she spoke. There was a rising inflection in her voice that made his heart jump. She had found a friend, she had found somebody who understood the terrible fear in her heart, the mixed-up feelings in her mind. The rising inflection in her voice showed how much this discovery thrilled her.

"It'll be daylight before we get to Walden," Bitts Mason said. "Walden is forty miles away. The sun will be up in the sky long before we get there."

"So it will," Lee said.

"Lee!" There was anguish in Bitts Mason's voice.

"What is it, Bitts?"

"She'll be out all night if we take her to Walden."

"Yes. But it won't hurt her to stay up all night, it won't hurt her nearly as much as sending her home."

"But, Lee," Bitts Mason wailed. *"Don't you realize what it means in this country to keep a girl out all night?"*

THERE was silence on top of the hill. The south wind went softly through the scrub trees. Saddle leather creaked as the horses moved sluggishly. Below them a voice suddenly bawled:

"Crane, you get on your horse and ride west. Wilkines, you ride north. As soon as it's daylight begin to cut circles and look for sign."

Samson's voice. Down there below them, he was bellowing like a bull as he issued orders. There was furious rage in his voice and fear so deep it was almost pathological.

"You can't keep a girl out all night," Bitts Mason repeated. "You just can't do it."

"Why?" Lee Jones said.

"Because — begging your pardon, Miss Helen, because people will talk. She's got to go home, Lee, for her own sake. I'm not talking for us now. I'm talking for her."

The little man was desperately in earnest.

"I am not afraid of what people will say," Helen Shute quietly said.

"You just think you're not afraid," Mason replied. "You've got to live in this country. And you can't live here in peace if you know people are talking about you."

He was stating a grim truth, was this little man. Both Lee Jones and Helen Shute recognized the existence of that truth and its grimness. Lee stirred restlessly in his saddle.

"Bitts, you take your choice about what people say. I don't care what they say. I know the truth and that's enough. But I've got to live with myself too. And if I send her down there to take a beating, I'll never be able to live with myself. If I do a thing like that, I'll hate my guts to the end of my days. I'm not going to do it, Bitts. Old Nard made too many mistakes with me and Samson made too many mistakes with Helen, for me to send her back, unless she wants to go. So we're going to leave the decision up to her, Bitts, we're going to let her decide."

He turned to the girl. "You do as you wish, Helen. Whichever choice you make, we will understand."

There was silence again on the windswept lonely hill top. Then Helen Shute was speaking.

"I'll ride with you, Lee," she said. "The people who know us will not say bad things about us. What the others say does not matter. I'll ride with you, to Walden."

The words said she would ride with him to Walden. But the tone of her voice said she would ride with him forever, if he asked her to.

With Bitts Mason still shaking his head in silent protest, they turned their horses and rode quietly down from the top of the windswept hill, riding through the moonlit ending of the night, toward the little town of Walden.

CHAPTER VII

AS BITTS MASON had prophesied, the sun was well up in the sky when they reached Walden. The few hundred inhabitants of the little town were already up and about their business. Housewives, their hair done up in paper curlers, were gossiping across the back fences. The family of Mexicans that lived at the edge of town were already up and were taking their morning siesta on the shady side of their adobe house. The stores were open. From the blacksmith shop came the cheery clang of the hammer on the anvil as the smith pounded out horseshoes. The swamper, an elderly bent Mexican, was sweeping off the front porch of the Three Star Saloon. Neither Bitts nor Lee seemed even to glance at the saloon, yet in the mind of Bitts was the memory and in the mind of Lee was the knowledge, that this saloon was the place where Old Nard had died.

Looking at Walden in the early morning, the town seemed barely to have awakened. Rubbing the marks of sleep out of its eyes, Walden seemed quiet and peaceful. To Lee Jones, who had seen the crowded, thronging population of New York, Walden seemed to be only a wide place in the road, a little town for trains to whistle at, and nothing more. Yet the weight of the gun on his hip, the butt of the rifle sticking out of the saddle scabbard, reminded him that Walden was more than a wide place in the road to him.

Loungers on the street nodded to Bitts Mason. They knew this little man here in this sleepy western town. A few of them knew the girl who rode with him and some of them guessed the identity of the tired but grim-faced youth who was the third rider.

Bitts responded to all greetings with the curtest of nods. No one molested them, no one paid any particular attention to them.

"They haven't learned here that Miss Helen is missing," Bitts said. "The news hasn't got this far yet."

At the hotel, all three signed the register. The sleepy clerk looked at the signatures in the book, then looked again. He glanced quickly up at them, open curiosity in his eyes, his mouth open to ask a question. At the look on their faces, he abruptly changed his mind.

"Three rooms," Lee Jones said.

"Yes, sir. They'll be ready mighty quick, sir."

"When we've had breakfast, we'll be ready for them."

They ate in the one restaurant in Walden, ham and eggs sunny side up, hot biscuits and butter, two cups of steaming hot coffee for each of them. They talked casually about how hungry they were and how good the food tasted. Bitts went up to the counter and bought two cigars. Lee grinned when the little man offered him one, and said no, he didn't smoke.

"That's one bad habit I'll acquire later," he said.

Deep down inside, he wondered if there would ever be a later, for him.

THEY returned to the hotel, walking side by side. The clerk, jingling keys, hastened toward them.

"You take Miss Helen to her room," Bitts said. "I'll take our horses to the livery stable and see that they get fed. I'll be back in a jiffy."

Lee watched him walk out of the small lobby. "He was feeling kind of blue last night," he said. "But he's all right this morning. I had forgotten all about the horses."

"So had I," the girl said. "Maybe we've got other things to think about."

Her face was grave. She was tired and sleepy but the gravity on her face came from more than fatigue and lack of sleep.

"Are you sorry?" Lee said.

"No!" she answered firmly. "I'd do the same thing over again. I'm not sorry for anything, except—"

Her eyes were on the pistol at his hip.

"I wish men didn't have to kill each other," she said.

"Someday they won't," Lee answered. He wondered when that day would come.

"I'll show you to your rooms, if you're ready," the clerk said.

They followed him up the stairs.

"I gave you three adjoining rooms," the clerk said. "They're facing the street in front." He seemed to think this fact made the rooms more desirable.

"Lock the door," Lee said to Helen, at the door of her room. "Don't open it for anybody but Bitts or me. I'll be in the next room. If you want anything, just sing out."

Her eyes were on him. There was hunger in them, deep, unfathomable hunger. She moved closer to him.

"Lee," she whispered.

"Yes, Helen."

"You'll be careful, won't you?"

Her hands were on his sweat-stained flannel shirt.

"I'll be careful," he said.

She went into her room and closed the door. He waited until he heard the key turn in the lock, then followed the clerk into the adjoining room.

He was sitting in a chair by the window when Bitts Mason entered. Bitts was carrying the two rifles from the saddle scabbards. His eyes were popping with excitement.

"Lee, there's a deputy United States marshal in town."

"What does that mean?" the youth answered, without moving from his chair.

"He's lookin' for two men. He's got a reward bill in his pocket, with pictures and descriptions of two men. I saw that reward bill, Lee, and the pictures."

"So what?"

"Lee, the names are different, but those are pictures of Holmes and Fox. They're wanted for murder and they're described as card sharps. Lee, don't you see what this means?"

"I see what it means," Lee Jones answered. He rose from his chair, walked across the room, walked back and sat down again.

"It removes one of the big obstacles in my path," Lee said.

BITTS didn't understand. To him, the fact that Holmes and Fox were card sharps proved that Old Nard had been cheated. But this was not news to him. He had known it all along.

"What obstacle, Lee? What are you talking about?"

Lee Jones looked out the window. "I was finding it difficult to go gunning for two men who might, for all I knew, have been honest."

Bitts looked shocked. "Honest? But I told you what Old Nard said—"

"He was wrong so many times, he might have been wrong this time too, for all I knew. Glisson did not say these men were gamblers. Shute, who had been in the game, had seen nothing wrong. Only my father claimed to have seen a crooked deal. And I know from personal experience how many times he's been wrong to have much confidence that he was right this time."

The words were spoken with a cold fury that amazed Bitts Mason. He had not known about this side of Lee Jones, the confused, mixed-up, bewildered side.

"I see," he said.

The youth's fury seemed to spend itself. "Thanks, Bitts," he quietly said. "This is good to know."

Mason looked speculatively at him. "It means something else too, Lee. It means we can turn these fellows over to the law. A United States marshal is usually a pretty tough cookie. He can handle the situation."

Lee Jones shook his head. "I don't believe I'm greatly interested in turning them over to the law, Bitts. Besides, they're only part of our problem. We can tell this marshal where to find them but who can we tell about Samson Shute?"

"Uh-huh," Mason said. "I had forgotten about him."

"I haven't," Lee said. "In many ways, he's a bigger problem than Holmes and Fox. We can solve them with a gun, now we know we can turn them over to the law, but a bullet in Samson's guts doesn't help me any and it doesn't help her at all."

He nodded toward the adjoining room

where Helen Shute, he hoped, was sleeping.

"Umh," Bitts Mason said. "You can't shoot a future daddy-in-law, can you, Lee?"

"You can, but it's not the best way to make you or your wife happy."

Outside, horses clip-clopped along the street.

"What are you going to do, Lee?" Bitts Mason asked.

"I don't know. I'm going to sit here and try to think it out."

"You plan to stay here in the hotel all day?"

"Yes. This is probably the last place anyone would think of looking for us. I'm going to get some sleep too. Your room is next door, Bitts?"

"Why'd you get three rooms, Lee? One room would have been allright for us."

"I wanted a chance to be alone and to think," the youth answered.

BITTS took the hint. Leaning one of the rifles against the end of the bed and taking the other with him, he went out the door. For some time, Lee could hear him moving around in the next room. Then the sounds of movement ceased.

The chair was soft and comfortable. He lifted his feet up on the table. The gun, holstered at his hip, hung down and touched the floor. He looked out the window. On the other side of the street and down half a block, he could see the Three Star Saloon. The swinging doors were hooked back now, so the cool morning breeze could blow into the place. Two horses, switching their tails against the spring flies, were tied at the rail in front.

Over on the other side of the plaza that made up the square in the center of Walden, he could see the railroad depot and by craning his neck, he could see the general store and Glisson's office on the second floor. He could see the outside stairway he had stumbled blindly down, bumping into Helen Shute. There, on the street, was where her father had beaten hell out of him.

Could all this have happened so few days ago?

It seemed to him that it had happened centuries ago. He could barely remember the peg-top pants clad college boy who had got off the train over there on that depot platform across the square.

He wondered if that college boy still existed. Certainly there was little of him here in this hotel room with the rifle sitting against the end of the bed and the holster gently bumping the floor every time he moved.

He was very tired. He went quietly to sleep without knowing it was happening.

He awakened to the clip-clop of two horses on the street outside. The sun had passed from the east and was halfway down the western sky. He had slept for hours.

He looked out the window. The two horses had stopped in front of the Three Star Saloon and their riders were dismounting. For a second, the identity of those riders did not register on his mind.

Then he recognized them.

Holmes and Fox.

They tied their horses at the hitching rack and went into the saloon.

Lee Jones got quickly to his feet. His muscles were stiff from the unnatural position in which he had been sleeping. He swung his arms until the circulation had been fully restored. He listened carefully for sounds from the two adjoining rooms. When he heard nothing, he tiptoed to the door, quietly opened it. Still tiptoeing, he walked along the hall and down the steps. He went through the lobby and out of the hotel. The street was bright with sunlight.

Still tiptoeing, he turned and walked toward the Three Star Saloon.

He didn't know it, but in that moment he was Old Nard Jones. Never subtle, never evasive, Old Nard had always gone straight to the heart of trouble, straight to the core of the thing, straight to the root. The shortest distance between Old Nard and the job that had to be done had always been a straight line.

Lee Jones walked straight to the Three Star Saloon.

IT SEEMED to him there was an unnatural brightness in the afternoon air. There was an intangible, unreal quality to the little town. The sky was high. A woman crossing the street was holding her skirts up to keep them out of the dust. The clang of the blacksmith's hammer was subdued and distant, like a muted chapel bell. His boots made strange scraping sounds on the board sidewalk. He did not realize he was walking on tiptoe, that his legs were bent at the knees, that he was leaning forward just a little. He knew his right hand was hanging limp at his side.

His fingers brushed the butt of the gun holstered there, brushed it again and again.

As he walked in front of the saloon, he could hear an excited voice inside.

"—Kidnaped that Shute girl. Ran off with her. Got her off somewhere on the range now. Her old daddy is coming into town to round up every man he can find, to hunt for her."

Walden, or at least that part of Walden present in the Three Star Saloon, knew that Helen Shute was missing. They were getting a lying, deceitful version of why she was missing.

Lee was very glad he had brought the girl directly to Walden and had registered her in the hotel. If they had attempted to hide out, they would have had hundreds of angry men scouring the range for them. Nor would they have had a chance to explain when they were found.

Bullets would have been the best they could have hoped for. Angry men would not have stopped to ask questions where a woman was concerned.

He stepped through the door of the saloon.

Holmes and Fox were standing at the bar. Backs half turned, they were talking to six or seven men who surrounded them. Behind the bar, the bartender was getting out a new bottle of whiskey.

The men were excited.

"We'll organize a posse," one said.

"We'll hunt that eastern dude down like he was a mad wolf."

"We'll teach him to meddle with our women."

It was a deadly trap that Holmes and Fox were baiting. It had failed by the narrowest of margins.

Or had it failed?

The thought jolted and jarred him? Had the trap failed. The fact that he had taken Helen to the hotel was little or no alibi. It was, he saw at last, the deadliest kind of trap. You only took a woman to a hotel for one purpose.

The fact that he had taken her to a hotel was the most damning kind of evidence against him.

It was a rope that would hang him and Bitts to the highest tree in New Mexico. Unless—

He stood just inside the door.

SOME of the men standing around Holmes and Fox had noticed him but no one had recognized him. Probably no one knew him. To them, he was just some kid with a freshly sunburned face.

Holmes poured whiskey.

"Yes, sir, they kidnaped her," he said.

"That's a lie," Lee Jones said.

There was a vague sort of smoke in the air of the saloon. When he spoke every sound was still.

Holmes turned around. His little mustache moved up and down.

"By God!" he gasped. "That's him right here now."

Holmes had thought this man was hiding somewhere. He had thought this man and Bitts Mason were skulking and scurrying and running. He did not know where Helen Shute was and didn't care. He didn't for a minute think she was really with Lee Jones and Bitts Mason. That had been a lie to enrage old Samson, a fabrication to arouse the anger of every man they met.

Lee Jones stood just inside the door of the saloon. The smoke in the big room seemed to be getting thicker. He decided it wasn't smoke at all but an illusion rising from the hot flames of anger burning within him.

Holmes and Fox stared at him.

A tunnel formed in front of them. Surreptitiously, a little step at a time, the men standing around them moved out of the way, moved to both sides, in a constantly widening tunnel.

"What—what was that you said?" Holmes said. He spoke off the top of his mind.

"I said you're a liar," Lee Jones said. "I also say you're a card cheat and I say you're a murderer."

He was only a boy, an eastern dude, a kid. He had a gun, but what of it? He wasn't dangerous. There were two of them.

Even if he was only a boy, he was responsible for what he said.

The words he had used could only have one answer here in the town of Walden, here in this western country.

Shoot him! Then he'll never claim the Bar Y.

Shoot him! Didn't a lot of people believe he had kidnaped a girl?

Holmes shrugged.

"Those are harsh words you're using," he said.

Fox reached for his gun.

Lee Jones shot him through the head.

As Old Nard's gun jumped and thundered in his hand, Lee saw Holmes leap to one side and pull his pistol from its leather.

Holmes' mustache was drawn up in a little snarl of mingled rage and fear.

Lee shot him three times, between the eyes, before he could even pull the trigger of his gun.

The big pistol rocked easily in his hands. Its booming roar lifted the little town of Walden from its afternoon quiet.

Fox fell forward. He seemed to fall a long time. When he hit the floor he did not move.

HOLMES slumped backward. He tried to grab at the bar rail. There was no strength in his fingers. He slid down in front of the bar. His back was on the floor, his head was resting on the polished brass rail along the bottom of the bar.

His little mustache lifted upward, then sagged.

The three holes between his eyes could have been covered by a silver dollar.

"Bitts said," Lee Jones heard himself saying, "Bitts said that hate was what made you hit the target. I guess —I guess I must have hated these two fellows an—an awful lot—"

No one moved. No one spoke.

"If anybody has anything to say, I'm ready to listen," Lee Jones said.

The silence held.

On the sidewalk outside was the sound of running feet.

"If you've got anything to say about Helen Shute or about me, say it now. Don't say it behind my back."

The silence was deep enough to last forever.

A man came through the door on a dead run.

It was Bitts Mason.

He had a rifle in his hands.

He saw the two bodies on the floor, saw Lee Jones standing very still.

The big gun was drooping in Lee's right hand. His left hand was clasped across his stomach as though some intolerable pain had developed there.

"Lee!" There was madness in the little man's voice. "Lee! Are you shot?"

Lee Jones did not answer. His face was green. He slipped the gun back into its holster. Still holding his stomach, he started for the back door.

He barely reached the alley before his stomach seemed to come up by the roots. Long before the terrible retching had finished, Bitts Mason had frantically jerked his clothes open.

"I don't see any wound, Lee. I don't see any wound. Where are you shot?"

The little man sounded like he was going crazy.

"I'm not shot," Lee whispered. "I'm just sick."

"Oh." There was compassion and understanding in the wizened little man's voice. "It's the sickness that comes when you kill a man. No matter how much he deserved it, you still get sick just the same. It will pass, Lee. It will pass."

"I hope so," Lee Jones whispered.

THIS was the greatest agony he had ever borne. Here in a littered alley, on a rubbish heap made up of ashes, broken bottles, and torn dry goods boxes, where big blue bottle flies buzzed, he paid part of the price exacted of Cain, paid it in weakness and nausea and soul sickness. Then, his back propped against a wooden packing crate, he was able to sit up.

"You're Old Nard's son after all," Bitts was saying. "You had the guts to face two men."

The little man's eyes were glowing. And Lee knew that in the opinion of Bitts Mason, and of all other men in this western country, he had done a great thing. He wished he could feel the same way about it. Later, he hoped, he would have a better perspective on the death of Holmes and Fox, but right now the facts of sudden death, the startled way Holmes' little mustache had twitched, the loggy way Fox had fallen, were too close to him to bring anything but pain.

There was some compensation in the knowledge that he had proved his courage. And won back the Bar Y. No one now would ever question his claim on the great ranch, now that there was proof that Holmes and Fox were known card sharps and were wanted for murder in connection with cheating at cards. Yes, he had won back what Old Nard had lost.

He got a lift out of that.

Then the back door of the saloon opened. The black distorted face of Samson Shute was framed in it.

Shute had a gun in his hand.

"There you are," he said.

He brought the gun up.

Its muzzle centered on Lee Jones.

Here was the fanatic, here was the mind warped on one subject.

"You ruined my girl," Shute said.

The gun boomed.

Lee was sitting down, his back against the packing case. Bitts Mason was squatting beside him. Neither of them had a chance to shoot.

Bitts Mason leaned forward, leaned into the path of fire.

The bullet intended for Lee Jones went into Bitts Mason's heart.

Before Shute could fire again, Lee had shot the gun out of his hand.

IN THAT hot, littered alley, where blue bottle flies buzzed and zoomed, Bitts Mason lay flat on his back on the ground. Lee Jones was bending over him.

"You shouldn't have done it," Lee whispered fiercely. "You little fool!"

There were tears in his eyes. He knew that Bitts had deliberately leaned into the path of that bullet in order to save him.

The wizened little man grinned wryly.

"Hell, Lee," he whispered. "What else was there to do? You—you're Old Nard's son. What—what else could I do?"

The grin faded. The whisper went into silence. The eyes of Bitts Mason looked up into the high clear western sky.

"You're Old Nard's son. What else could I do?"

Those whispered words went round and round in Lee's mind. Bitts Mason had died to save him, to save the son of Old Nard. His memory of his father and of the thousand and one wrong things Old Nard had done, was offset by the fact that Old Nard had inspired this loyalty, such loyalty that a man was willing to lay down his life to save the life of the son. Lee knew, then, that in spite of all the bad things Old Nard had done, he must have done many splendid things, many fine things, and he knew he must have misjudged his father as badly as his father had misjudged him.

He looked up.

Samson Shute, his face gaunt and haggard, was still standing there.

"He saved your life too," Lee Jones said. "He and Helen together." "I'm sorry," Samson Shute said. "I guess I was a little crazy, thinking about—about— They told me—"

"I know what they told you. There wasn't a word of truth in any of it."

"Huh?" Shute seemed not to understand. "They said—"

"She's at the hotel," Lee Jones said. "She's all right."

He paused, thinking of what he was going to do. He thought of the girl in pigtails, in ribbed cotton stockings, in middy blouses. He got slowly to his feet.

"You meet me in the general store," he said. "In half an hour."

"The store?" Shute said. He was perplexed.

"Yes," Lee Jones grimly said.

HE WALKED into the saloon. He requested the men in there to take care of the body of Bitts Mason. They hastened to obey. He walked back to the hotel. At his knock, she quickly opened the door.

"Lee!" she was in his arms. "Lee! You're all right."

She had changed. The pigtails were gone. Her hair was done up on the back of her head. And with that one simple change, she had changed from a girl to a young woman.

"Your daddy is waiting for us at the store," he said. "He—hurt his hand, but otherwise he's all right."

She knew there was far more to the story than he was telling but she asked no questions. Later, when they reached the store, and Samson Shute, his right hand wrapped in a bloody bandage, hungrily took her in his arms, she still asked no questions.

And when Lee Jones said, "Your father wishes to buy you some new dresses and a lot of other things," she took that for granted too.

Something new had come into her life, something that she had wanted for a long, long time.

When she went over to the women's section of the general store and began to buy dresses and hats, shoes and bright new hose, Samson Shute, after one look at the face of Lee Jones, interposed no objections.

"Sure, Helen," he said. "Buy all you want."

When she had finished her shopping, they rode out of town together, this boy and this girl, a boy and a girl no longer, but a young man and a young woman. Samson Shute, with an occasional glance at the bloody bandage on his right hand, silently watched them leave.

This was the son of Old Nard Jones riding with his daughter, and Samson damn well knew it.

This was Lee Jones, back home where he belonged.

The western sky was high above them, the wind from the south was warm, April was in the air, as they rode out of the little town of Walden, together.

THE END

THE SILENT ENEMY

By WILLIAM CANBY ARMSTRONG

ONE of the most devastating epidemics experienced in this country swept across the West during the gold rush days in 1849. It was the dreaded cholera which took its toll in dead of the migrating peoples and of the Indian population as well.

During the summer of 1849, the Kiowas held a Sun Dance and a great number of Cheyennes, Arapahoes, and Osages gathered to witness the elaborate ceremonial rites. While the dance was in progress, one of the Osage spectators was seized with cramps. There was a wave of panic among those standing nearby. Most of the Indians present had no idea what ailed the man, but a Cheyenne named White Face Bull had heard rumors of the plague; he urged his people to break camp and run for their lives.

The frightened crowd scattered quickly, folded up their tents, and fled toward their homelands. But they only carried the disease with them. All the way, the stricken were falling out of the straggling columns, dying, wailing, doubled up with convulsions so symptomatic of the dread disease. The Indians were at a loss as to how to cope with the situation. No one knew what to do; the medicine men died like the rest.

One of the most pathetic scenes was enacted at the Plains' Indian Camp on the Cimarron River. In that camp was a very brave war-chief, Little Old Man, who had often fought in defense of his tribe. Gallantly he donned his scalp shirt and war bonnet, painted his face for war, and fastened his war-charm about the neck of his running horse. It was a moleskin collar that had protected him from countless bullets and arrows. Then he took his trusty lance and shield of tough buffalo hide, mounted, and rode slowly up and down through the camp.

The sight that met his eyes can hardly be described. Everywhere his people were dying, and he who had been their protector for so long was now helpless to defend them. Shaking his lance, he called out, "If I knew where this thing is that is killing my people, if I knew where it could be found, I would go there and fight it, and die killing it!"

Even while he spoke, the silent enemy had crept up and struck him. He was seized with cramps, but managed to stay on his horse. Circling he returned to his own tent, carefully stepped down from his horse, and fell to the ground. Within a few minutes he too met his death.

When the epidemic finally subsided, the native population had paid heavily in numbers. Nearly half the Indians of the West were never to ride again.

★ READ THEM ALL! ★

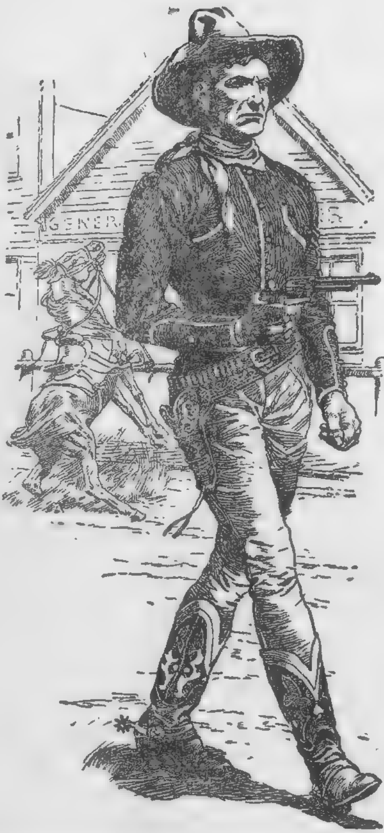
"Mammoth"

WESTERN — DETECTIVE — ADVENTURE — MYSTERY

CHICAGO MAN

by E. K. Jarvis

When a man from Chicago invades the West you can count on hot air and hot lead.



He walked slowly, purposefully toward them, his sixgun ready, while a hail of lead spat by . . .

THE box car of barbed wire was unhooked from the freight train and shoved on to the railroad siding at Dutch Flats at six o'clock in the morning. Clint Carson, drummer working for the American Barbed Wire Manufacturing Company, of Chicago, Illinois, arrived in Dutch Flats on the four o'clock train of the same day.

His job was to sell the carload of barbed wire. And a hundred more like it, if he could.

In Chicago they said Clint Carson could sell anything, from soap to hardware, and this was true. But selling soap to grocery stores and iron stoves and galvanized buckets to hardware dealers had eventually lost their appeal. He lived in the age of the empire builders, when fortunes were being made in railroads, in grain, in real estate, in mines and speculations, and there was something of the empire builder in him. This western country was a new empire, just opening up. To a new country he was bringing a brand-new product—barbed wire.

He proposed to fence the west. And to get rich while he was doing it!

When he got off the train at Dutch Flats, it was the first time he had ever set foot on soil west of the Mississippi river. He was a Chicago man. His first glance told him that Dutch Flats was not like Chicago.

The difference was not a matter of

size. Dutch Flats was a dot on the prairie with blue mountains off on the horizon, a town of maybe two hundred inhabitants. Chicago was a mighty city on the lake front with hundreds of thousands of residents, and growing bigger every year. There was no comparison between the sizes of the two places but the big difference between Chicago and Dutch Flats was in the people who lived in each place.

People who lived in Chicago were always in a hurry. In Dutch Flats an air of leisureness was obvious. Every resident of the town was down at the depot to watch the train come in. They had time for things like this in Dutch Flats.

They had time to be friendly too. As he picked up his bags and started toward the depot, men lounging on the platform nodded to him. Nobody nodded to a stranger in Chicago.

There were other points of difference too. You saw many white-faced men in Chicago, men who rarely saw the

sun. These men here had brown faces. They wore big hats and flannel shirts and high-heeled boots. And they carried guns. A holstered pistol hung easily on the hip of almost every man on the platform.

The guns, and the easy, familiar way they were worn, surprised Carson. People in Chicago didn't carry guns. He had only fired a gun once in his life, a little double-action .32 caliber pistol in which pulling the trigger lifted the hammer and fired the weapon. It was a toy, really. But the guns these men carried weren't toys. Why did they carry them, he wondered? They seemed to be such friendly people that guns were unnecessary.

A FRIENDLY station agent accepted Carson's credentials and showed him his car of barbed wire sitting on the railroad siding.

"We plan to give a demonstration of the uses of barbed wire," Carson explained. "It's a great invention, the only sure, safe way a rancher can control his stock, keep them within his own range, and prevent straying."

The station agent was thoughtful. "I've heard of barbed wire," he said.

"Has any of it been brought in here yet?"

"No. Not yet. I heard that one big rancher has ordered a couple of car loads of it, but the wire hasn't been delivered yet. You're the first man to bring barbed wire to Dutch Flats."

Again the thoughtful note sounded in his voice, but if he had any reservations, he did not express them. He showed Carson where the salesman could find lodgings.

"Ain't no hotel in Dutch Flats. You'll have to stay at Ma Pearson's rooming house. But she'll take mighty good care of you."

She did take good care of him, fluttering in and out of his room like an old hen that has suddenly discovered a missing chick. She adjusted the windows so he would have the maximum of air and the shades so he would have the minimum of sun light. She dusted out the immense china washbowl and brought him a teakettle full of hot water so he could shave, puffing up the rickety back stairs with the teakettle in her hands.

"Anything else you'd like to be comfortable, Mr. ——— I'm just going to call you Clint. Ain't nobody around this country calls anybody mister unless they're mad."

Drying chapped hands on a faded blue apron, she peeped timidly at him over gold-rimmed glasses.

"That is, if you don't mind," she finished.

"Glad to have you call me Clint, Ma," he answered grinning.

Blue apron fluttering she went out of his room, stopping in the doorway long enough to tell him for the fifth time that if there was anything he wanted to be sure to ask for it.

What service! Carson thought. No, is wasn't service. Service was what you got in the big hotels in Chicago. Service was a grinning black porter scraping and bowing for a quarter tip. Service was a room clerk in a high collar rapping sharply on the bell and saying, "Front! Boy, show Mr. Carson to the best room in the house."

Service was front, service was show, service was the servility of a lackey looking for a tip. This was something different. Ma Pearson had never heard the word. She didn't go to all the trouble to bring him hot water just to put up a front, she did it to show her friendly interest in him, she did it for the same reason that the booted, spurred, and holstered men lounging on the station platform had smilingly spoken to him. This was the courtesy of the west, the smiling, easy, interested friendliness of a big new country.

It was something new in Clint Carson's life, something he was beginning to like.

WHEN he finished shaving, he went down to the freight siding to inspent the car of barbed wire and to make preparations for hiring a crew of men to unload it. He also had to rent a shed of some kind for storage space until the wire was sold.

Across the street directly in front of the box-car was a saloon. Three horses were tied in front of it and a spurred, booted, holstered cowboy was lounging in front. As soon as the cowboy saw Carson inspecting the car, he turned his head into the saloon and called out.

"Here he is now!"

Carson heard the words clearly. Two men came out of the saloon and joined the cowboy. The three walked across the street, moving with purposeful strides. The man in front was tall. He wore an expensive white hat and a gray flannel shirt. A heavy pearl handled revolver hung easily at his hip.

"Howdy," the tall man said to Carson. "You the drummer that's selling this 'bob' wire?"

There was arrogance on the tall man's face, arrogance in the twist of his hawk nose, arrogance in his expressionless gray eyes, arrogance in the tones of his voice.

The tones of arrogance raised prickles of hair along Carson's back. In Chicago, men were arrogant. Out here, arrogance was out of place.

"I am," he answered crisply. "What can I do for you?"

"You can hitch this car on to the next train that comes through here and get it out of the country," the answer came.

For a second, Carson thought he hadn't heard correctly. He couldn't believe he had heard such words. In this friendly little town, in this friendly western country, he was being told to get out of town.

His opinion of the west underwent a swift revision. Men were friendly out west all right, *but all of them weren't.* Some of them were arrogant, some of them were tough, some of them were hard. And he suddenly saw the reason why so many of the men wore guns. There wasn't much law out here, maybe there wasn't *any* law. In a country where there wasn't much law, men had to wear guns to protect themselves from people like this tall man with the arrogance on his face and in his voice.

"What—what did you say?" Carson asked.

"I said to take your wire and get to hell out of here with it."

"May I ask why?" Carson answered.

The tall man hesitated. Beside him, the two cowboys stood silent and impassive. The butts of their holstered guns were worn smooth from much handling.

"Why?" Carson repeated.

"It might be," the tall man answered. "It might be because I say so."

Because *I* order it, it must be done. *I* am the master here. You are nobody, you are nothing. You must do what I say.

"And who," Carson questioned, "are you?"

"That might not be any of your business," the tall man said.

"And it might be too," Carson hotly answered. "Am I to understand you're ordering me out of town?"

The tall man nodded slowly. "I guess you about hit the nail on the head that time. Not that I've got anything against you personally, but we don't want any 'bob' wire around here yet."

A HOT wind blew along the railroad tracks from the west. The sun, low in the western sky, threw long shadows over the little town of Dutch Flats. A horse clip-clopped along the tracks. The four men stood in the shade at the end of the box car. Across the street in the saloons and in front of the stores, Carson was aware that men were watching them.

"Why don't you want it around here *yet?*" Carson questioned.

"That," the tall man answered, "is something else that's none of your business."

"You can go to hell," Carson said. "I came out here to sell barbed wire and I'm going to sell it and neither you nor anybody like you is going to run me out of town."

Even as he spoke, he wondered what was going to happen next.

The tall man glanced at the cowboy on his right and nodded. The cowboy pulled a gun. He spoke without taking his eyes off Carson.

"You want me to gut-shoot him?" he asked.

Carson was dumfounded at the calm methodical way they proposed murder.

The tall man thought about what his gunman had asked. Out of the corners of his eyes, he was aware of the watchers on the street. If the watchers had not been there, his answer might have been different. Slowly he shook his head.

The gun had been pulled so quickly that Carson had not had time to catch his breath. One second he was telling a man to go to hell. The next second he was looking down the muzzle of a gun. By the time the third second had passed, even before the tall man had shook his head, he knew they were trying to bluff him.

Bluffing was something he understood and he determined to hold his ground.

"I know a bluff when I see one," he said. "And I'm going to say again what I said before: you can go to hell. When I get out of this country, it will be because I want to go and not because I'm ordered to leave. I hope you understand me quite clearly. I'm here to sell this car load of barbed wire and I'm going to stay until it's sold. And when this one is gone, I'll order another, and then another—"

Whuck!

The cowboy with the gun took two quick steps forward. He lifted the pistol. Carson saw it coming. He tried to dodge. The pistol smashed across the side of his head with stunning force. He stumbled backward, stars exploding in front of his eyes.

He had read about pistol-whipping. Now he knew what the words meant. He stumbled and sat down heavily as the strength went out of his legs. Dazed and stunned, he was vaguely aware of two sounds.

One was the tall man saying: "Maybe that will convince you we mean what we say."

The second sound was the swift hoofbeats of a galloping horse running down the street beside the railroad.

THE horse slid to a halt beside them. The rider looked at the four men beside the box car. A pistol flashed.

"Put that gun down, you rat, before I let daylight thorugh you," the rider said.

Not until he heard her voice did Carson realize the rider was a woman.

"Drop that gun!" she repeated.

The pistol in her hand covered the cowboy who had struck Carson. His face darkened. He didn't like it a little bit but he let the pistol slide to the cinders in the railroad track.

The tall man looked reproachfully at the girl on the horse.

"Now, Nan," he said.

"*Miss* Nan to you, Bent Lucas," she answered. "And while you're about it, you and the other killer of yours pull your guns and drop them on the ground."

The tall man reddened. All along the street eyes were watching him. He didn't like the idea of a girl forcing him to put down his gun. He shook his head.

The bullet from the girl's gun knocked his beautiful hat fifteen feet.

"When I tell you to drop your guns, I mean it," she said. "Now drop them. And be quick about it."

Amazed to the bottom of his soul, Carson saw the two men slowly pull their guns from their holsters and let them slide to the ground. They didn't want to do it, not a little bit. The story of how a girl had made them take off their hardware would be told and retold over the entire country, to their bitter discredit. They would have liked to do anything except drop their guns, but they didn't have any choice. They couldn't draw on a woman, they couldn't shoot this girl on the horse. A hundred enraged men would be hungering for their blood if they did that. On the other hand, they couldn't refuse to obey her orders. The bullet that had knocked off Bent Lucas' hat had not only convinced them that she meant what she said but had proved that she could shoot straight.

The guns crunched as they were dropped into the cinders.

Carson got slowly to his feet. He backed against the box car and leaned against it while a little strength came back to his legs. He was burning with anger. The unfair pistol-whipping had enraged him as he had never been enraged before. But over and above his rage was amazement at this girl. Who was she? Why had she pulled a gun on the three men? Why had she rescued him?

For that matter, why had they ordered him to leave the country and take his barbed wire with him?

"You—" the girl's blue eyes were fixed on him. "You, there. Are you able to talk?"

"I think—I think so, Ma'am," he answered.

"Are you the man who brought this barbed wire in here?"

CARSON took his time about answering this question. Bent Lucas had asked him the same question. Then the fireworks had started. Now this girl was putting the same query to him.

"Speak up," she said impatiently. "I heard there was a man in town with a car load of barbed wire that he wanted to sell. Are you the man?"

"Why do you want to know?" he countered.

"Because I want to buy it," she answered.

Bent Lucas stiffened when she spoke.

"You mean you're going to buy this wire?" the tall rancher questioned.

"That's right," she answered.

Anger reddened his face as she spoke.

"I'm going to use it to fence part of Silver Springs," she added. "Our part of the springs."

Carson had no idea of what she was talking about but Lucas seemed to understand. He turned quickly to the salesman.

"I'll take delivery on this car load of barbed wire tomorrow," he said.

"Eh?" Carson gasped.

"I've bought your barbed wire," the rancher repeated. "I'll take delivery on it tomorrow. Here's the down payment to bind the bargain."

Pulling a thick wallet out of his inside coat pocket, he began counting out twenty dollar bills.

The girl on horseback stared in consternation at the scene.

"What—what are you doing?" she questioned.

Lucas glanced up. "Paying for this barbed wire," he answered. Again the note of arrogant triumph was in his voice.

"Put that money down," the girl said. "I've already bought the wire."

She sounded scared, frightened.

"First come, first served, Miss Nan," Lucas icily said. "It happens I've already made a deal to buy this barbed wire. And I'm buying it."

He turned to Carson, shoved a stack of bills toward the salesman. "Here's five hundred. I'll pay the balance when I take delivery tomorrow."

The salesman looked at the wad of bills Lucas was holding toward him.

"Take your five hundred dollars and stuff it," he said.

"What?" the rancher gasped.

"Five minutes ago you were ordering me out of town," the salesman explained. "You didn't want the wire, then. But the minute somebody else turns up and wants to buy, you jump into the market up to your neck. It won't work, Lucas. It won't work."

"Your barbed wire is for sale, ain't it?"

"It's for sale," Carson answered. "And I'm selling it to the lady on the horse."

The frustrated arrogance on the rancher's face was balm to Carson's soul.

THE salesman did not know why this girl and this rancher were both trying to buy his barbed wire but he could see one thing quite clearly: a fight was going on. He and his barbed wire had landed right in the middle of it. He didn't know who was in the right in this fight, but he knew whose side he was on.

"I'm selling to the lady on the horse," he repeated. "She made the first offer to buy and she gets the merchandise. Is that clear or shall I draw you a picture?"

"It's clear enough all right," Lucas answered. All color had gone out of his face. Carson saw the rancher's gaze go from him to the guns on the ground, then to the gun in the girl's hand, then to the watchers along the street. Bent Lucas didn't like the situation. He didn't like it even a little bit.

"Sorry," Carson said bluntly. "I would have sold this wire to you or to anyone else who wanted to buy it—"

"You're not half as sorry as you're going to be," the rancher answered. He looked at the girl. "Mind if we pick up our guns?" he said.

"Just leave them lay," the girl answered. "And get moving, you three." Your business is all finished here."

"All right, all right!" the rancher answered. He walked off the railroad tracks and across the street. His two men followed him. All three mounted horses tied in front of the saloon and spurred out of town.

The girl slid from her horse. "Thanks, friend," she said huskily. "I was afraid he had got in ahead of me."

"My name is Clint," the salesman answered. "Clint Carson. You don't need to thank me. But I would appreciate it if you would tell me what this is all about."

She looked appraisingly at him, her glance taking in his expensive clothes, his white shirt, his smooth hands, and his clean finger nails. All of these things spelled eastern dude to her. She was a western woman. She had little faith in anything that came out of the east, especially if it had white hands and wore tailored clothes.

"My name is Nan Jones," she said. "I guess maybe you wouldn't understand it, Clint, but there's a series of water holes known as Silver Springs about forty miles north of here. The cattle from one big ranch and from four little ranches use these springs for water. Bent Lucas owns the big ranch. My father owns one of the little spreads. The springs are on land that is actually open for settlement but except for the water it isn't worth settling. In the past, we've always considered the springs as common property. Since there was no way to fence them, we had to consider them as belonging to all of us. Now we've heard about this new stuff they called barbed wire. And Bent Lucas has heard about it. We have learned he has ordered two car loads of it to fence the springs."

"I see," Carson said slowly. "And if he fences the springs, your cattle won't be able to water there. You'll go—"

"Bust," Nan Jones supplied. "That's exactly it. However, Lucas hasn't been able to get delivery on the wire he has ordered."

"And when I brought in a car load of wire, he was afraid you would buy it and use it to fence part of the springs," Carson said. "That was why he wanted me and my wire out of the country, to keep you from getting it." He explained what had happened before she arrived.

"That's the answer all right," the girl said. "I learned only this morning that a car of wire had been put on the siding here at Dutch Flats. At first, I thought it was the wire that Lucas had ordered. Then I learned it wasn't his wire. So I came to see about it."

"And you got here just in time to buy the whole lot," Carson said, grinning.

"Yes," she answered. He was aware that she was studying him thoughtfully.

"I've sold a lot of merchandise in my life," he said. "But this is the first time I ever had people fighting to buy from me. When can you take delivery on the wire?"

"I can have six men and four wagons and teams here by sun-up tomorrow morning," Nan Jones answered promptly. "There's only one thing—"

A WISTFUL note crept into her voice. With the coming of that note, a subtle change showed on her face. When she had ridden up, she had been a hard-headed aggressive young woman, riding hell for leather for what she wanted. Now, somehow, this aggressive young woman was gone. In her place was a wistful little girl.

Clint Carson had once seen a street waif looking through the plate glass window of a huge Chicago store at the most beautiful doll in the world. She was bare-footed, her little skirt was ragged and torn, her hair had a single greasy ribbon in it. She wanted that doll in the store window more than anything else on earth, but she couldn't buy it, not in a thousand years.

Something about this brown-faced western woman reminded him of that little girl in Chicago. When she said, "There's only one thing—" she looked like that little street waif.

"What's that?" he questioned.

"I—we—can pay you for it," she answered.

Carson gulped. He had sold the wire to this girl, and now she was telling him she couldn't pay for it.

He knew his company. They wanted cash on the line, cash on delivery. They were willing to extend a minimum amount of short-term credit to well-established local stores with a good financial rating but extending credit to individuals was not their policy. Al Boggs, the credit manager, would die of apoplexy at the very thought.

His face revealed what he was thinking.

"We'll be glad to give you notes,"

Nan Jones quickly said. "We'll pay all right, but we just can't pay now."

"How—how long would the notes run before payment?" he asked, and kicked himself for asking.

"A year," the girl answered. "We might be able to pay them a little before a year, if we're lucky.

Again she reminded him of the little girl looking through the plate glass window at the doll she could never hope to own. Carson had gone into the big store that day. He had taken the little barefooted girl with him, taken her past all the decorated floorwalkers, past the supercilious clerks, and he had bought the doll for her. The last he had seen of her she had been going down State Street with the doll tightly clutched in both arms, a little girl who thought Chicago was heaven.

He knew he oughtn't to do it, he knew he was a sucker, he called himself bad names under his breath, but he knew what he was going to do.

"I'll take your notes, Miss Jones," he said.

Her eyes glinted like stars in the summer sky.

"Thank you, Clint," she said.

FOR a second, he thought she was going to kiss him. Or perhaps he hoped she was. But she didn't kiss him. She shook hands with him instead, then swung lithely into the saddle.

"I'll have the men and the teams here in the morning," she said. "And thank you again, Clint."

"Don't mention it," he said.

"Al Boggs can go to hell," he muttered, watching her ride down the street.

In spite of his defiance, he knew that Al Boggs would deduct the price of one car-load of barbed wire from his salary and commissions.

He picked up the three guns that had been left lying in the railroad tracks, stuck them into his coat pockets. The thought occured to him that maybe the credit manager would deduct the value of the guns from the price of the barbed wire, if he sent the weapons in to the company. He was kidding himself and he knew it. The American Barbed Wire Manufacturing Company had no use for weapons.

That night he dreamed he had fenced the whole western territories with barbed wire and had accepted worthless promissory notes for every foot of the fencing. He awakened in a cold sweat with the imaginary specter of the irate Al Boggs deducting millions of dollars from his salary.

"You gave the wire away," Boggs was yelling, in his dream. "You deliberately defrauded the company. And you'll have to make good on every penny of it even if you work for nothing for the next ten years."

In cold reality, Clint Carson knew there was not much fantasy about this dream. A car load of barbed wire ran into thousand of dollars. If Nan Jones and the four ranchers she represented didn't pay off, he would certainly be working for nothing for months to come.

"Why do I have to be such a damned sucker?" he groaned. "A red mouth and blue eyes and a pair of pretty legs, and I jump in up to my chin. Well, maybe she won't come for the wire in the morning. Only—"

Only he *wanted* her come for the wire.

"But what if she doesn't pay her notes?" he thought.

It was a jarring thought. In combination with his dream, it drove sleep out of his mind. He got up and sat by the window.

A cool night breeze was blowing

down from the far-off mountains. A bright moon made the empty street outside his window almost as light as day. He struck a match and looked at his watch. It was also four o'clock. Dawn was not far off.

Dutch Flats was sound asleep. Far off in the night a coyote howled. He sat by the window and let the restful quietness of the western night seep into his soul. Then a new sound came to his ears, the creak and jolt of a heavily loaded wagon passing under his window. The moonlight revealed the driver hunched up on his seat, the two horses straining at the heavy load.

The wagon was almost out of sight before he realized it was loaded with spools of bright new barbed wire.

Barbed wire!

Where would anyone find barbed wire in Dutch Flats?

Except—

Except from his carload!

IN THE dark room he suddenly began hunting for his clothes. He pulled on his socks and shoes, slid into his pants, hastily pulled on his coat. Then he remembered the three guns lying on the dresser. He found one of them, slipped it into his coat pocket.

He went quietly out the front door of Ma Pearson's rooming house. Keeping in the shadows, he walked swiftly down to the railroad.

The car on the siding was plainly visible. A wagon was drawn up beside the open door, loading. Another wagon was waiting to load. Two men inside the car were handing spools of barbed wire out to two other men standing in the bed of the wagon drawn up beside the open door of the car.

Carson watched the men work, then began to grin. "I'll say something for Nan Jones," he thought. "She really gets things moving, but fast."

She hadn't waited until daylight to come for the wire. The pressure to get at least part of the disputed springs fenced was too great to waste an hour. He stepped out of the shadows and started across the street toward the box car standing on the siding. He did not know there was anyone behind him until he felt the gun jammed into his back and heard the voice rasp in his ear:

"Get those hands up, drummer, and be fast about it!"

He lifted his hands and turned his head. He knew the man standing there. The last time he had seen that thin face had been with Bent Lucas.

"Okay," he said. "But take it easy. I've got about a hundred dollars on me. You can have it without any argument."

"I'm not interested in your money," the gunman answered.

"No? Then what do you want?"

"I want you to walk down the street ahead of me. I'll tell you where to go. And don't try to put your hands down or I'll blow a hole in your backbone. Move, drummer, move."

Carson glanced at the men unloading the box car. If they saw him, they gave no sign. Anyhow they didn't know him.

He started walking.

"Around the corner and down the side street," the gunman said.

Carson obeyed his instructions. He was ordered to enter the side door of a saloon. He found himself in a small back room with two men in it. One of the men was Bent Lucas. The other was his second gunman.

The rancher glanced up. His face was all arrogance now, all successful egotism. He grinned. "Hello, drummer," he said.

"What do you want?" Carson demanded.

The arrogant grin widened. "What

do I want? Oh, nothing much. I just want to pay you for the barbed wire my men are taking, so everything will be legal and you can't raise a squawk and say I stole it."

"Your men?" Carson gasped. Until this moment he had thought that the men removing the wire from the car were employed by Nan Jones. "Are those your men out there?"

Lucas nodded. "Naturally," he drawled. "Did you think they were working for somebody else?"

"Well—I—"

Lucas enjoyed his confusion. He sucked every drop of satisfaction out of the situation, then got down to business.

"How much for the car load of wire, drummer?" he asked.

"Eighteen thousand and three hundred dollars," Clint Carson answered.

Lucas didn't bat an eye. "The price, plus freight charges, is forty-two hundred. I've recently had occasion to get prices on wire in carload lots. You can't jack up the price on me, drummer, hoping that maybe I won't be able to pay. Here's your money."

He shoved a stack of bills across the table where he was sitting.

CARSON looked at the money and said nothing. His mind was working lightning fast. He saw the spot he was in. Lucas was taking the wire. This was larceny, robbery, theft, whatever you wanted to call it. To escape the charge of stealing the wire, Lucas was paying for it. Thus Carson could not say the wire was stolen. Lucas could produce witnesses—and the two gunmen were certainly witnesses—to prove he had paid cash for it.

"The wire is already sold," Carson said. "You're a little late in trying to buy it. I'll be glad to ship you as much as you want, but this load is already sold. Miss Jones and her partners are the legal owners of that wire. You'll have to make your proposition to them."

Lucas listened and grinned. "Not tonight," he said. "Not tonight, drummer. You own that wire so far as I'm concerned and I'm buying it from you. Here's your money."

He shoved the stack of bills a little closer to Carson.

"The wire is not for sale," the drummer said. "That's all there is to it. The wire is sold. Consequently it's not for sale."

He turned, started to walk out of the back room. He was running a bluff, or trying to, even though he knew, before he tried it, that they would never let him walk out of there like this.

He quickly discovered he was right.

The gun, which had momentarily lessened its pressure on his back, was instantly jammed against his spine.

"You goin' somewhere?" Lucas drawled.

Carson flushed. "I guess not," he answered.

"Here's your money," the rancher said, for the third time. "Take it and you can go."

Carson's temper was at the boiling point. These cowhands weren't going to work a deal like this on him. Lucas was bluffing. There was no way he could buy the wire by force.

"No," Carson said.

Lucas looked at him.

"I won't sell that wire to you," Carson continued. "The fact that your men are taking possession of it remains what it was when they started—plain, simple robbery. That's all there is to it, Lucas, and all there is going to be. I don't know what kind of law you have around here but you are certainly going to face charges of stealing. Now how do you like that."

The back room was silent. Behind him, Carson could hear the gunman breathing heavily. Bent Lucas said nothing. Finally he spoke.

"I have two witnesses who will swear I paid you," he said.

"And I'll go into court and call them liars," Carson answered.

A thin grin was on the rancher's face. "Oh, no, you won't," he said.

"Why won't I?"

"Because you'll be dead!" Lucas said.

His words were hard, jarring sounds in the silence of the room. They jarred Clint Carson. He looked closely at Lucas, trying to see if the rancher meant what he said. His shock grew when he realized that Lucas meant every word of it.

FOR the first time, Carson fully realized how much was at stake here. He had thought that he might lose some money if Nan Jones and the little ranchers she represented did not pay their notes. That would hurt, but after all, money was only something to spend. You could always make more money. Now he realized that more than money was at stake, a damned sight more. His life! If you lost your life, there wasn't anything you could do about it, not ever.

"You'll just be found dead," Lucas continued. "You won't have a dime on you. I'll have two witnesses who will swear I paid you and that you walked out of here with the money in your possession. The motive for the killing? Robbery! You were carrying a lot of money. You were waylaid and robbed. That will be all there is to it."

He had everything all thought out down to the last detail!

"You—you really mean it!" Carson whispered. It was a statement, not a question.

"You can bet your last dollar I mean it!" the rancher answered. "If we really have to get tough, we can get awful tough. Now, drummer, for the fourth and last time, I'm offering you your money. Are you going to take it?"

Carson thought for a second.

He either took the money or got killed! It was either or else! Reaching forward, he picked up the stack of bills from the top of the table.

"Okay, drummer," Lucas drawled. "You can go now. And if I were in your shoes, I'd keep right on going."

When Clint Carson stepped outside the back door of the saloon, dawn was beginning to appear in the eastern sky.

Down the street and out on the railroad siding he could hear voices raised in argument. He walked in that direction. The men had stopped unloading the barbed wire. Three empty wagons were lined up beside the tracks. Eight or ten men were gathered in a knot around the first wagon.

He walked up to the group. The men stopped arguing, turned toward him.

"There's Clint now," he heard Nan Jones say. He'll explain mighty fast who owns this wire."

She came quickly toward him.

"Clint," her voice was a flat, tight sound. "These men are working for Bent Lucas. They've already unloaded part of the barbed wire. They say he owns the wire."

"They're right," Carson answered dully.

In the half-light he could see her face change.

"Lucas—Lucas owns this wire?" she whispered.

"I just sold it to him," he answered.

"You—you sold it to him!" She was choking over the words.

"Yes. He gave me a choice. Either

sell him the wire or get myself blowed full of holes."

Slowly, he told her what had happened. The men drew near and listened to what he was saying.

"And you let him get away with it?" Nan Jones said.

"What else could I do?" he questioned. "He meant business."

"Just because one of his men was holding a gun on you, you let him scare you into selling him wire which you had already sold to us!"

I COULDN'T do anything," Carson defended. Somehow he felt like a first-class heel yet he knew that legally he was completely in the clear. No money had passed between the girl and him. Therefore no sale had been completed. And actually Lucas had been the first person to offer to buy the wire. Legally, he was in the clear, but he was having trouble with his conscience. Morally, he had sold the wire to Nan Jones and the men she represented. Then, under the pressure of a gun, he had backed out. Somehow this smelled an awful lot like cowardice.

"I just couldn't do anything else," Carson repeated. "They had me."

A tall, stooped man detached himself from the group.

"Maybe you couldn't do anything," he said. "But I can. Where's Lucas?"

"In the back end of the saloon on that side street, the last time I saw him," Carson answered.

"Did he pay you for the wire?"

"Yes."

"Give me the money he gave you."

"Give you—Why?"

"Give it to me and don't ask any damned questions!" the tall man said.

Carson silently passed the money to him.

"No!" Nan Jones suddenly said. "Dad! No! You won't have a chance. You can't do it—"

"Shut up, Nan. I'm handling this."

The girl was silent but she looked like she was suddenly too scared to breathe. The tall stooped man slipped the package of bills into his pocket. In the growing light of dawn he started walking down the street. A heavy pistol hung low in the holster at his hip. They watched him start to go around the corner toward the back door of the saloon.

Bent Lucas and his two killers were just coming out of the back door of the saloon.

The guns started instantly.

Carson saw the stooped man reach for the pistol in his holster. He was an old man and he moved slowly. An eternity seemed to pass while he was trying to get the gun out of its holster.

A bullet knocked him down before he could pull the gun.

He fell heavily, lifted himself on his left hand, and still tried to pull his gun.

Bullets kicked up puffs of dust around him.

He got the gun out of the holster, lifted it in a trembling, unsteady hand.

It boomed once.

Then a bullet knocked off half the top of his head.

The guns stopped.

The stooped man lay in the dusty street without moving.

Carson heard Nan Jones begin to cry. Then she was running toward the still figure lying in the street. He ran beside her.

SHE dropped to her knees, tried to pull her father's head into her lap. Blood stained her hands and her skirt. Tears too hard to cry glistened in her eyes.

Carson bent over her.

A pistol fell out of his pocket.

She stared at the gun.

"Did—did you have that all the time?"

He nodded.

"I—I had forgotten I had it," he stammered.

He was telling the truth. From the moment when the pistol was jammed into his back until he bent over Nan Jones he had completely forgotten about the gun he was carrying. He was not accustomed to thinking in terms of weapons. The world where he had lived all his life was raw and rough and full of scramble and fight but men in his line did not settle their differences with guns. Clint Carson did not think in terms of weapons. He had completely forgotten the gun he was carrying.

Out here in this raw western country they still thought of guns.

"You—you rotten coward!" Nan Jones whispered.

How could he explain?

Down the side street by the door of the saloon a man was lying on the ground. One of Lucas' gunmen. The tall man had made good on one of his shots. Bent Lucas and his remaining killer were bending over the man on the ground. Then they were standing up. They still had guns in their hands.

Carson picked up his gun.

He started toward them.

They saw the gun in his hands, they saw him coming.

"Get that son-of-a-gun!" Bent Lucas yelled.

Their guns came up.

Bullets tore holes in the air around Carson.

He lifted the gun he was carrying.

The dawn light was stronger now. It was strong enough for him to see Bent Lucas over the sights of his gun. The arrogance on Lucas' face was gone. It had been replaced by a startled fear when he saw this drummer coming toward him with a gun.

Carson pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened.

He thought all he had to do to fire the gun was to pull the trigger. Vaguely he had the impression that pulling the trigger was all that was necessary. This had been true of the only pistol he had ever fired.

He thought the gun he had was a double-action pistol. Instead it was a single-action gun, an old model, deadly in the hands of a man who knew how to use it, but not like the only pistol he had ever fired.

He pulled the trigger again. And nothing happened.

A bullet from Lucas' gun passed so close to his head that he could feel the movement of the air.

He realized, then, that the gun he had in his hands had to be cocked before it would fire.

He pulled the hammer back.

Behind him, a gun was exploding. Bullets were coming past him from behind. Back there on the ground he knew that Nan Jones was shooting. He saw Bent Lucas hastily take a snap shot at her.

He lined up the sights of his gun again.

The heavy pistol jumped in his hands as he pulled the trigger.

AN EXPERT gun slinger would have emptied the gun in the time Clint Carson took to fire one shot. The very speed with which the gunman fired the weapon might have ruined his aim and made the bullets miss. Clint Carson didn't know the one fact that all the gunmen knew; you had to shoot fast or you might never shoot at all. He thought you were supposed to aim before you fired.

He aimed his shot.

The very fact that he stood there facing them disturbed Bent Lucas and his gunman. The fact that the girl was also shooting at them distracted their aim. Otherwise Clint Carson would never have lived long enough to fire even one shot. They would have mowed him down, filled him with lead, before he learned how to fire the gun.

His aimed shot hit Bent Lucas squarely in the left chest. It knocked all the arrogance out of him, forever.

Carson was aware that there were two figures sprawled in the side street and that a third man was running like the very devil in the opposite direction. He felt dazed and there was a dreamlike quality about everything. There was a haze in his mind. He felt somebody tugging at his arm.

He looked around. Nan Jones was standing beside him.

"Clint," she was whispering. "Clint! Did—did you ever shoot a gun before?"

He looked at the pistol in his hand. And shook his head. "I never shot a gun like this in all my life," he answered slowly.

He saw she was crying. And wondered why.

"When I saw you trying to shoot, I realized you didn't know anything about guns," she was saying. "And I'm so very, very sorry I called you a coward."

He patted her shoulder. "That's all right," he said. "I am a coward. I didn't want to do this. I wanted to run. And right now I'm scared clear down to the bottom of the shoes."

"So am I," she whispered. "So am I—"

Her words faltered and he saw the gray pallor begin to creep over her face. "I—I feel like fainting," she whispered.

"Go ahead and faint," he answered.

He caught her as she sagged down, then picked her up and carried her around the corner to where a group of awed men were coming toward them. Bent Lucas' men were already slipping quietly away. When their leader died, their fight had ended. The men coming toward Carson were Nan's friends.

There was a new light in the eyes of these men, a respectful light.

"Is she hurt?" one asked.

"Are you all right?" a second questioned.

"Let us help you," a third said.

"We're both all right," he answered. "I'm taking her down to Ma Pearson's rooming house so Ma can take care of her for a while. And when you get this side-street cleaned up, you can start moving that barbed wire out to Silver Springs."

He walked on. The full light of dawn was on the world. People, roused by the roar of gun-fire, looked out of the windows at them.

She lay easily in his arms. Somehow she was the lightest burden he had ever carried.

AROUND Dutch Flats they still tell the story of how the drummer selling barbed wire blew in from Chicago and landed right in the middle of a fight. And they tell how he took a pistol he did not know how to use and went in and faced Bent Lucas and a gunman who had cut their teeth on guns, how he gambled his life, and how he won. They call this sort of thing courage around Dutch Flats. They respect courage there, respect it mightily.

They say how this same drummer kept on selling barbed wire for three or four more years, until he had sold enough of the stuff to fence the whole western territories. Then they tell how he settled down on a ranch out toward Silver Springs. And they tell of the girl who married him, Nan Jones, and how she stood beside him in that famous gun fight in the early morning hours. Some of the facts they've got mixed up. She didn't stand beside him in the fight. He was all alone out in front and she was behind him. But she was shooting with him, and in her soul she was standing beside him, as she has stood ever since.

CHIEF RED CLOUD

ONE of the men who fought the ruthless advance of the white hordes into the West most valiantly was Red Cloud, chief of the Sioux. He was not the blood thirsty savage that early white settlers so often faced—but a quiet man, simple and direct in speech, courageous in action, an ardent lover of his country, and a true leader of his people.

His life began in 1820 near the forks of the Platte River. His father was a respected warrior keenly intent upon teaching his sons the fine art of living in a world filled with adversity. When Red Cloud was six years old, his father presented him with a spirited unbroken colt saying, "My son, when you are able to sit quietly upon the back of this colt without saddle or bridle, I shall be glad, for the boy who can win a wild creature and learn to use it will as a man be able to win and rule men." Diligently the child set about his task, and after many days of bitter disappointment and hard falls he mastered the animal. His later life as a leader among men proved his father's prophecy.

At twelve the boy was ready to participate in the hunt. Reckless, but skillful he was able to hold his own with the older men. As he reached the age of maturity, the Sioux were entering upon the most stormy period of their history. The white man showed himself to be both friend and enemy at one and the same time causing fear and confusion in the heart of every Indian. When reasoning peacefully could not get the white man what he wanted, he would resort to such underhanded means as plying the Indian with drink. An occasion such as this, brought death to the father and brother of Red Cloud who fell under the gunfire of their own drunken chief. Red Cloud resorted to Indian justice, and killed the chief and his son. From this time on he was recognized leader of the Ogallala tribe with Man-Afraid-of-His-Horse, then head chief of the Ogallalas.

In every council Red Cloud's stand was an uncompromising one. He knew that to assent to the wishes of the white men at every turn would mean total extinction of his people. He counseled them against submission, but the inevitable end was near. By 1880 the few Sioux left were supported on government reservations. Red Cloud, a man of ninety in the year 1909, could live only in the glory of bygone days and remember vividly the fight he had waged to retain the greatness of the Sioux, a losing battle.

HAWKINS' LUCKY STRIKE

IN 1875 William Hawkins went West with the hundreds of thousands of fortune-seekers that had the same idea. He appeared in Arizona in spring, and lacking funds found employment as a teamster hauling freight from Tucson to the gold and silver camps in the Sonora range. Now Hawkins' didn't know much about mules, and as a result he ran into quite a bit of trouble trying to make the animals go where he wanted them to go. No matter how he ranted and raved, swore and hollered, he could make little or no headway with Old Sam, an unruly and vicious brute who never missed a chance to bite or kick at him.

One morning Hawkins left Tucson for a camp eighty miles away. His load was a heavy one, and part of the way the road was little more than a trail along the side of the mountains. Although the going was very hard, he succeeded in covering sixty miles of the distance without any trouble.

When Hawkins was just beginning to stop worrying about whether he would make it, he saw before him a steep ridge, with a deep canyon on each side of the narrow road and a heavy grade. Half way across, Old Sam, the mule, began to kick and at last managed to get out of the traces. Then he calmly laid down in the middle of the road and made no effort to move. Hawkins exhausted himself trying to get the animal on his feet, but try as he might he could not get the animal up. Finally two Mexicans came down the trail and offered to lend a hand. One of them gathered a lot of dry grass, piled it close to the mule's hind quarters and set a match to it. Instantly Old Sam's heels flew into the air and landed on Hawkins' stomach with such force that the driver reeled over to the side of the road. He landed on top of a ledge fully a score of feet down the mountainside.

But unusual luck was brought to Hawkins with that kick. The Mexican in pulling the grass for his fire had torn away some earth, and from his landing place on the ledge Hawkins caught sight of the rich pay ore which lay beneath it.

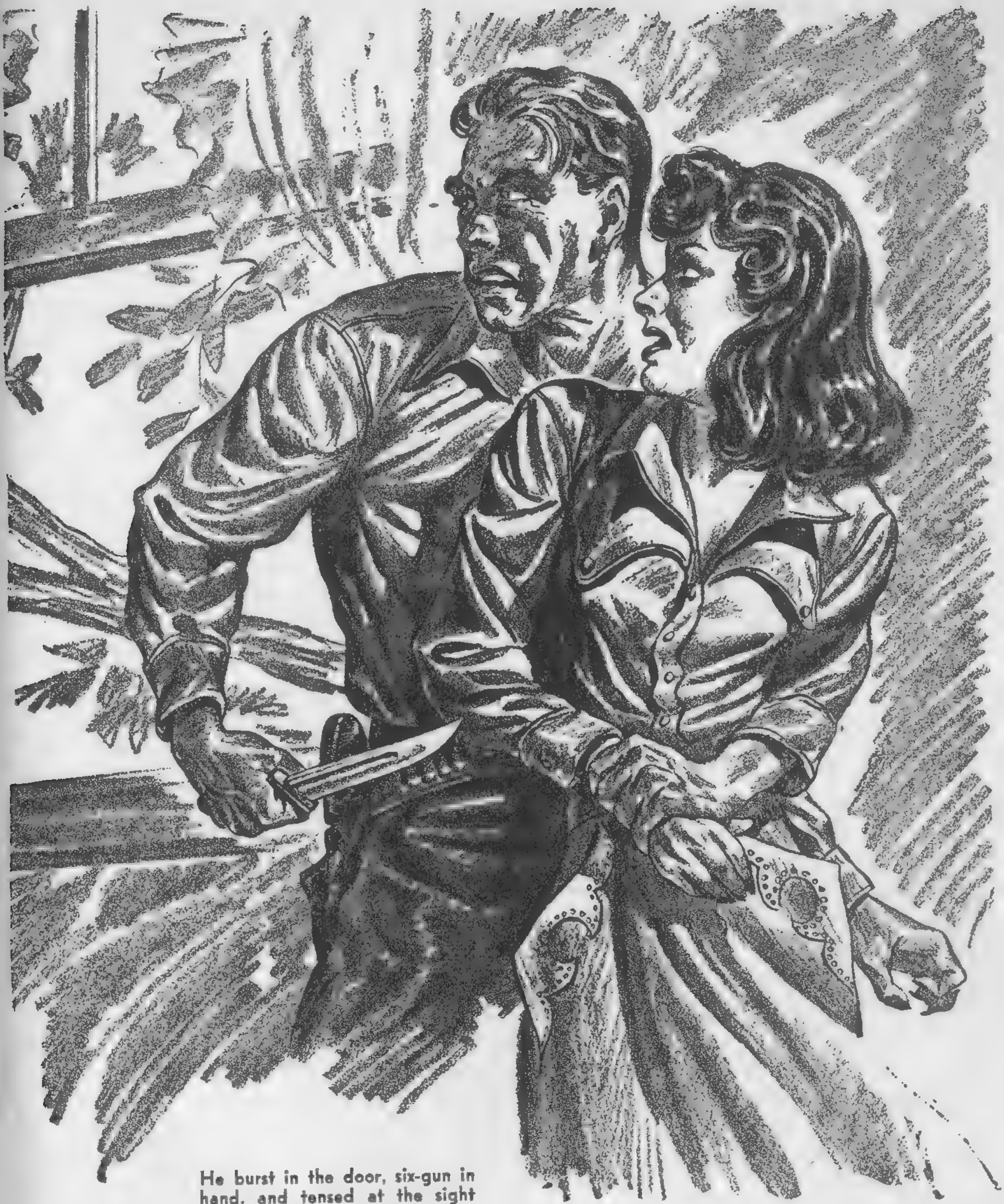
Hawkins got up and with studied nonchalance did not breathe a word of his discovery to a soul. Instead, on his return to Tucson, he wrote to his brother in San Francisco to gather up all the cash he could and hurry to Arizona. The summons was quickly obeyed, and soon a gang of men were at work on what Hawkins named the Daylight Mine. From the first, their fortunes were made.

—*Sandy Miller*

DEATH AT THE WATER HOLE

by William Hopson

Water is a peculiar liquid; it mixes well with everything— most readily, blood and liquor.



He burst in the door, six-gun in hand, and tensed at the sight that met his startled gaze

HE HEARD voices and the voices seemed to be a million miles away, sending eerie, diabolical laughter swirling off into space through a million aeons of time. Something was wrong and he couldn't quite understand what. The voices came nearer, seemed to surround and close down in upon him; and he knew that he was sick, oh! so terribly sick. He tried to open his eyes.

He got them open, the lids rolling

back across grains of sand, ground glass, and a thousand other things that hurt so badly. And some instinct told him that his eyes were red and bloodshot from the drinking, and then memory came back; hazily but enough to know that the conductor had kicked him off the train with the almost empty quart bottle in his hand and that he had staggered away from the station, walking stumblingly and half blindly up the track in a hazy world that knew little and what difference did it make anyhow?

Jeffrey Gladstone's senses told him this much when he opened his eyes and tried weakly to sit up where he had fallen by the loading pens. He wondered then how he had managed to walk three hundred yards along the track before his legs gave way and he crumpled into a world of darkness in which everything spun crazily and clawed at his stomach and tried to jerk out the intestines.

It took a second try before he finally managed to sit up. The sun was pouring down as only a ten o'clock summer morning sun can pour down in Texas, and when his fingers unconsciously went to his tie to straighten it, he noticed that they were shaking.

A dozen men surrounded him; good natured looking men in worn boots and dusty clothes whose faces were tanned a leathery hue from much exposure to wind and rain and hot sun. One of the men had a bottle in his hand. He must have seen the dry, lip licking look that the man on the ground cast at it, for he bent and handed down the bottle.

"You look like you really been on a good one, Mister," he said not unkindly. "They say as how a little hair of the dog is a good thing mornings. Where you from?"

Jeff Gladstone took the bottle and drank; he took a deep one because he hadn't eaten anything in more than seventy-two hours; so much does a system rebel against food after so much liquor has been poured into it.

"New York," he said, gagging a little.

It was raw stuff; cow country rotgut that would take the hide off a steer's back; not like the wines and other imported liquors from his father's private stock at the mansion over in Connecticut. But it cleared away the cobwebs and put a kind of fiery strength into his shaking, liquor tortured body. He tried to get to his feet and didn't make it. The man handed the bottle to another and reached a horny, rope burned hand down. Jeff felt strength in that hand. Hard, honest strength that he would never forget as long as he lived.

HE GOT up, the gentleman in him noting that his light suit was rumpled and liquor stained and that some of the buttons were missing from his sharp-toed patent leather shoes. Reaction set in then and he leaned weakly against the fence of the loading pen and tried to collect his strength. There wasn't much strength left.

"Easterner, huh?" asked the man who had helped him to his feet.

Jeff nooded. "God, I'm sick," he mumbled.

"How long since you've et?"

"I don't know. Must have been three or four days ago. I don't remember. Is there a restaurant where I could get some coffee?"

"Sure. But they're pretty crowded today. Everybody's in town for the election. But I think I could get you fixed up. My name's Ab Rondell. These other gents are Slim and Pete and Joe and Mike and hell they're just no account punchers and farmers and general friends of mine. We all came in to vote."

Jeff Gladstone didn't give a damn

about who was voting nor why; they could hold an election every night, including Sundays; he only knew that he had gone on a rip roaring bender because a rich man's daughter had laughed in his face at a proposal of marriage, that he never remembered getting on the train, that the trip that might have lasted a day or a month across the entire breadth of the United States was hazy in his memory. He wanted to forget.

He noted vaguely that Ab Rondell and the others suddenly had gone into a huddle and were talking and laughing among themselves, casting side glances at him. He wanted only two or three cups of coffee and nothing more of life at the moment. If only he could get that trembling out of his hands, and his knees too. Rondell gave him another drink and the drink not only steadied him but went to his liquor inflamed brain and set him up high again. He felt curiously light headed as Rondell and the others helped him to the back of a saddled cow pony and then the lanky man got up back of him.

"You don't look in no condition to walk," Rondell said. "So we'll ride down. Ever been on a horse before?"

Jeff Gladstone thought bitterly of the horses in his father's stable; clean limbed mounts of selected blood that could take a fence back of a pack of hounds; James Gordon Bennett had introduced from England a new fangled game called polo and it took a pretty good man to sit the saddle on one of the trained polo ponies that knew how to follow a ball down the field.

"This is a good cow hoss," Ab Rondell said from behind. "No need for you to be afraid of him. He's gentle but when you get him working a herd he can really tear up the ground. The best little cutting hoss in Texas."

Cutting horse. What did that mean? Jeff Gladstone did not know, nor cared less. He was sick; his system was empty and he wanted only some coffee. Then he wanted to get into a hotel room and lie down and die quietly.

The other men had mounted their horses and loped on ahead. The cow pony carrying the two men rocked along at a walk.

"She'll be a humdinger of an election night," Ab said from behind. "We lost our sheriff last week. He was found out by the Sage Springs water hole with a bullet in his back. So the county commissioners from the four precincts got together and decided, along with the judge, that we'd ought to hold an election and put in a man to finish out Corson's term."

God, why doesn't the man shut up? went through Jeff Gladstone's mind. If I don't get off this horse in another minute I'm going to start retching.

But Ab Rondell didn't stop. He seemed to be a good natured, loquacious type of man.

"A lot of trouble over that waterhole. Gabe Anson of the G Bar claims it. So does Erd Stanner of the E Star. Damned old moss horns been battlin' ever since we smaller ranchers and farmers came in and started fencin' our spreads. So what do they do, them two big fellows? Anson grabs off Poke Bird, the town marshal, and runs him for sheriff. Bird is Anson's bootlicker in town. But Erd ain't asleep. He's real prompt about puttin' up his own candidate, Hal Warren, who's more of a beer drinkin' jailer than he is a deputy. Each figgers the other outfit and its candidate are out to skin the other—hell, it's a mixed-up mess. Half the people in town are laughin' about it and half are mad. I got five to one says there'll be gunplay before the day is over and it'll be the bloodiest gunplay this town's ever seen."

THERE wasn't any gunplay when they went in. The town was quiet except that the board sidewalks were pretty crowded. It was Saturday, Jeff thought. He wasn't sure. Things had been pretty hazy for the past few days. Or had it been weeks? He didn't know and cared less. Ab Rondell helped him down in front of a small Mexican restaurant and they went inside. There were a few people present and they stared at Jeff Gladstone with curious eyes.

"Some more friends of mine," Ab said. "They ain't voted yet. Half of 'em swear they won't. Ain't so sure but what they're right. We'll see by six o'clock when the polls close over at the courthouse."

A pretty young Mexican girl came in and Ab spoke to her in Spanish. She went back to the kitchen and presently returned with a big glass filled with fresh juice squeezed from a dozen or so ripe tomatoes. Jeff reached for it but Abs hand closed over the glass. He spoke to the girl again and she set out two small bottles whose contents were red too. Flaming red. Ab poured generously, added salt and pepper and gave Jeff the glass.

Fire hit his insides when the stuff went down. It poured molten streams into his stomach. But by the time the coffee was down on top of it the girl came in with a platter of steaming ham and eggs. Jeff Gladstone realized then that Ab's molten "picker-up" had worked wonders. He ate, had another cup of coffee, and the shakiness seemed to go out of his legs. He fumbled for money and discovered that his wallet was gone.

"This one's on me," Ab said, and paid. "Let's go over to the hotel. I expect you'll be able to sleep."

Jeff Gladstone did sleep. He slept so hard that when he woke up the sun was down and his brain was befogged. He got up and found a bathroom with only cold water and managed to take an icy dipping and cleared his brain and made him tingle. When he went back to the room Ab had paid for Ab was there. He was grinning.

"Feel any better?"

"A thousand times. I'm grateful to you. I'll wire for some money and return the favor."

"Aw, forget it," Ab said, grinning again. "Come on down and let's eat. The polls just closed. Votes ought to be counted any minute now. Poke Bird is already struttin' around town sayin' as how as soon as he gets his marshal's badge changed for the sheriff's he's goin' to run this county right. Hal Warren is drunk in one of the saloons and swearin' the first thing *he's* goin' to do as sheriff is to chase the Anson bunch right out of this town. I knew it would be that way. Everybody in town knew that whichever one got elected it would still mean a sort of undeclared war, the town gettin' plumb unhealthy for the others. Come on."

They went downstairs into the street and over to the Mexican restaurant again, and ate. As they came out a tall man came by, pretty drunk. He was about sixty and wore riding clothes set off by a big handlebar mustache. He pulled up and looked at the two men.

"What's that critter you got with you, Ab?" he asked, contemptuously.

"Friend of mine," Ab said, grinning. "And, lookin' up the street, here comes one of *yourn.*"

Jeff Gladstone saw something then; everything that Ab had explained. He saw it in the angry stiffening of the old rancher's body. He saw it as the man let go with a half roar.

"Erd Stanner a friend of mine! Yo're a liar, Ab, and I can lick you right in the middle of the street."

Stanner came up then, short, mild looking, but with a certain capableness about his moon face that told of a dangerous man when he was aroused. He looked at Gabe Anson and switched his peculiar squinting gaze to Ab's good natured face.

"A real clever man, aren't you, Ab—you and your friends?" he asked, in surprisingly soft English. "Pretty good stunt that—running in a ringer."

"The votes been counted yet?" asked Ab.

"I just came from the courthouse—"

"Where you tried to pad the boxes with a few extra names nobody ever heard of," grunted Gabe Anson.

"I just came from the courthouse," Erd Stanner went on, ignoring the interruption. "The votes are counted. Twenty-six for Hal, mostly my riders and a few friends. Twenty-one for Poke, that damned water stealing outfit of yours, Anson. And one hundred and thirteen for a new candidate named Jeff Gladstone, that nobody ever heard of in this country."

"I took his name off the hotel register and we wrote it in," Ab snickered, and turned to Jeff. "You're the new sheriff of this county, Jeff. Congratulations!"

CHAPTER II

JEFF GLADSTONE had begun to feel almost normal again. The shakiness had gone from his legs and his mind was pretty clear; clear enough to realize that this was something that just couldn't happen. Himself—Jeff Gladstone, spoiled and almost profligate son of an eastern financier, sheriff of a Texas county; elected by voters he didn't know nor had ever seen. It didn't make sense.

"I don't quite understand all this, Mr. Rondell," he said to Ab.

"Hell, there's nothing to it. And don't call me Mister. Makes me feel like somebody almost as important as Stanner or Anson here. Call *them* Mister, Jeff But don't call me that."

"That's all very fine . . . Ab. But I'm a stranger here. I haven't even the right to be elected."

"Out here," Ab said, grinning his friendly grin, "we make our own rules. If the county commissioners figgered the same way as we small ranchers and farmers figger—that two big outfits are wrecking this county and making this town unsafe for the rest of us—then we think we've got the right to do something about it besides gunplay. So we run you in as a ringer. We busted up the votes. We got all the votes turned in your direction. Maybe you can't hold down the job. It won't be an easy one. But you'll be a better sheriff than as if we'd had one of them two gents you now see comin' along the street together. Down there."

Jeff looked. He saw a fat, piggy eyed man that some instinct told him was Poke Bird, even before he saw the marshal's star. He saw another man, so drunk he was weaving, hanging on to Poke Bird's arm. He was almost fifty, stoop shouldered, and had a receding chin. Hal Warren, Erd Stanner's unsuccessful candidate.

"I've got to think this thing over," Jeff Gladstone said.

"Both of 'em together still wouldn't make a decent sheriff," Ab said with frank candor. "Not when Poke licks Anson's boots and Hal drools everytime he sees Stanner here."

"I've got to think this thing over," Jeff Gladstone repeated.

Gabe Anson spoke up. "It ain't goin' to take much thinkin', Mister," he said bluntly. "Just think about getting the next train outa this town. I run my ranch like an honest man, I pay my hands decent wages, I pay taxes too. But no damned sneaking gent like Erd Stanner is going to take over that waterhole. And no damned dude sheriff is going to stop me. Get out of this town, Mister—whatever your name might be. Get out fast. If you don't, we'll take you down to the town tank, souse you in it, and then chase you out on a bareback burro."

"I don't usually agree with anything that Anson says or believes in," Erd Stanner said in his soft voice. "But he's right there. We can run this county without the help of any twenty-five cent easterner run in as a ringer in a sheriff's election."

Poke Bird and Hal Warren came up. They didn't look like men who had, an hour before, been rivals in an election. Their eyes were directed at the new man; openly derisive and jeering.

"So that's him, huh?" grunted out the short, barrel bellied marshal.

"Howdy, *boss,*" jeered Hal Warren, still hanging onto the fat marshal's arm. "No jealousy in me a-tall. I'll show you the ropes. Nobody kin handle a drunk like me when you bring him in. I'm a Bird—ha, ha, a funny joke, that—at wrappin' a gun barrel around their head and then throwin' 'em in a cell to sleep it off. You arrest 'em. I'll handle 'em."

ERD STANNER wasn't drunk. He didn't look like the drinking kind. His eyes, when they looked at Hal Warren, his late "candidate" for office of the now dead sheriff, were almost dead. They weren't dead when they switched to Jeff Gladstone's face.

"Forty-eight hours," he said. "You've got forty-eight hours to dust this town off your feet. When you're gone I'll settle my affair with Gabe Anson and his bunch. I'll get that waterhole. But you get out of this town, Gladstone. Dust Breeze fast."

"That's a threat," Jeff said quietly.

"Arrest him, sheriff," sneered Hal Warren. "Go ahead—arrest him.'

"You're fired, Warren," Jeff Gladstone told the man in a voice he tried to keep calm. "Clear out."

Warren's bony face turned color. Sudden rage pumped enough adrenelin to his heart and brain to offset the liquor. He let go of Poke Bird's arm, and he was quite a sober man now.

"I don't have to wait forty-eight hours," he said ominously. "I can do what Erd has said he'd do: chase you out of this town. I can do it right now."

Jeff Gladstone was angry and yet he wasn't angry. A part of him wanted to laugh at the situation. But something had struck a strange chord in his brain: he was remembering the New York policemen in their coal scuttle helmets and how, no matter whether outnumbered, they went in because they had the law back of them. That thought gave him new strength and overcame the fear he instinctively felt. He turned to Ab Rondell.

"Have I the authority to appoint a deputy on the spot?" he asked.

Ab instinctively backed up a step. "Aww, now wait a minute, Jeff . . ."

"Arrest that man. You will also arrest this man Stanner too for making threats to an officer."

Gabe Anson let out a roar of rage and lunged, drunk enough to be mean and wanting to do something about it. He did it, coming in swinging. He wore no gun. After that things got pretty hazy for Jeff. He was too busy ducking and wrestling to think about anything except that he, Ab, Gabe Anson, Poke Bird, and Hal Warren were one scrambling mess of swinging arms and flailing legs, and that a lot of people were standing around laughing and cheering them on.

Hal Warren wasn't wearing a gun.

Neither were the others except Poke Bird. Warren got hold of the marshal's pistol and swung it at Jeff Gladstone's head; but Jeff had an arm free and managed to ward off the blow until he could twist half off Anson and jerk the gun into the clear. It went off, barrel pointed straight up, and that brought more laughter from the crowd.

Something hit Jeff from behind; something that rattled tinnily and when he twisted his neck he was amazed to find it was a parasol. It was gripped in the hands of a very pretty girl.

"Get up, all of you. Dad! For shame! Get up, I say."

They got unscrambled somehow and Jeff came up with Hal Warren's collar in one hand and an arm locked around Gabe Anson's long neck.

"Let him go," the girl commanded to Jeff. "He's drunk and I'll take care of him."

"He's drunk," Jeff said grimly, "and I'll take care of him. Come on, Ab. Bring them all. And you too, Stanner. You're under arrest."

STANNER went quietly, and perhaps that might have been one reason why old Gabe Anson didn't struggle anymore. He jerked Gladstone's hold free and straightened in bull snorting dignity.

They headed over to the small, flat topped courthouse with the girl and a few of the curious following. "Your office is that one on the corner," Ab said. "Jail is next to it."

They went inside and at Jeff's inquiring look Hal Warren nodded surlily toward several large keys on the wall. Jeff opened the door that led into the jail, unlocked three cells — all there were and empty—and shoved Stanner and Anson into a couple. Poke Bird and Warren shared one together.

"Just you wait, mister," Erd Stanner said grimly. "I won't be in here long. My riders'll bust this place wide open the minute I give the word."

The girl was over at the cell talking to Anson, and for no reason at all the old man burst into roars of laughter. He looked at his daughter and wiped tears from his eyes, the fight having sobered him quite a lot.

"Just you wait until your mother hears about this out at the ranch," he said. "She'll have a fit, Gloria. Now look, Hon, you go over and get the judge outa his office and get me some bail fixed up."

Gloria Anson turned and went out, her eyes flecking to Jeff Gladstone. Most of the buttons were gone from *both* shoes now and also from his coat and vest. His tie hung by a single black strand. Ab was grinning, wiping at the faint crust of red drying around his fast swelling nose.

"Not bad for a starter, Jeff," he chuckled. "I only hope you can finish it."

"I guess I can try," Jeff said quietly.

For something had happened to him within the past half hour; something he couldn't understand. Something he liked. Many times, back in that other life, he had lain awake nights, his nerves too liquor jangled to let him sleep. And he had thought about Man and God and how it came about that he, a rich man's son, was slowly becoming a drunkard who couldn't quit. He saw ahead of him only what had been during most of his twenty-five years; affluence, politeness, responsibility toward one's family inasmuch as manners were concerned, gay parties. His asking Hester Kedricks to marry him had been one of those things. True, he had known her for many years and had had a young "crush" on her. She was the belle of their rich young set and worthy of any man who could get her.

It would have been a fine thing to have welded two such families as the Gladstones and the Kendricks through such a marriage, even had he not been in love with her. But she had laughed at him, she who laughed at them all worshipping at her feet, and some kind of a pride—a cutting hurt wouldn't let Jeff take it. He went on a bender and he had, days or weeks later, been thrown off a train.

His head was clear now and he saw many things there in the jail. He remembered Ab's strong hand when Ab had helped him up down there by the loading pens. He saw in Gabe Anson and Erd Stanner men who, honest or unscrupulous, were of a reliant breed of men of a kind Jeff hadn't realized existed. They were craggy and rugged; as rugged as this flat, arid country from which they had wrested wealth and power. He needed some of that strength — and Hester was far away. That was why he had told Ab quietly, "I guess I can try."

He would try. He had needed something like this to snap him up and bring his feet back to the ground. He could think now, think clearly. He had a fight on his hands, a fight with a fellow from back east named Jeffrey Gladstone, son of a rich man, an idler and almost profligate, who liked to drink and drink heavily.

Gloria Anson came in with a fat, easy going man who was without tie and very bald headed. He wore a pair of specs down on his nose. He looked over the specs at Jeff and then came over and shook hands.

"I'm Jim Lewis, the judge here," he said. "Glad to know you, Gladstone. Gloria is saying as how a few of the boys need some bail. What's the charges?"

"Hal Warren is charged with being drunk in a public place, attacking an officer, and attempted assault with a dangerous weapon. Poke Bird with drunkenness and fighting in a public place. Anson gets the same. Erd Stanner threatened an officer, ordering him to leave town, implying a possible murder if his order is refused."

"Hmm," said Jim Jewis thoughtfully. "How much you think bail ought to be?"

"None, if you have confidence that they will appear when they're due in court."

HE SAW Gloria Anson's eyes look at him a little startled, and even those of Jim Lewis suppressed a faint twinkle.

"I reckon that's fair enough," the judge said. "You boys giving me your word you'll be here when ordered to appear?"

"I'll be here, all right," Stanner said grimly from back of the perpendicular bars of his cell. "You think *I'm* running off and leaving a ranch because a two-bit dude got elected in a freak election and has me arrested? He's the one who'll do the running?"

"That's a second threat," Jeff said to Jim Lewis. "I ask you to hold that man without bail, judge."

"All right, sheriff," Jim Lewis said mildly; and to Erd Stanner: "No bail for you, Erd. You've been hitting the high places for a long time now, you and your riders. Enough that you might have got the idea the sheriff and the people in this town are afraid of you. Well, it looks like the new sheriff ain't, and neither am I, Erd. You'll stay in jail over the week-end until court is convened Monday morning. The rest of you boys can go."

Ab went over and unlocked two of the doors. Poke Bird and Hal Warren filed out, and there was plain murder in their eyes. Anson began to snicker again and came over and stuck out his hand to Jeff.

"By God, Mister, I apologize for sailing into you down there on the street. I had it comin' and I'll be in Monday to pay my fine. Anytime you're out our way we'll be glad to have you."

"Thank you," murmured Jeff, certain that he was turning color from the ears up.

Gloria Anson must have seen it too. Her frank, amused green eyes played over him and then went to her father. "He's real nice, papa," she said. "I hope he comes real soon. Maybe he'll try to make love to me."

If Jeff's face had been red then it now must have been something terribly worse. When Ab began to snicker and Jim Lewis joined in Jeff Gladstone would have given his right arm to have been a hundred miles away.

"If he does," old Gabe said, "I'll shoot the blasted pants off him. I don't want any danged sheriff moonin' around my ranch."

"He won't be mooning around the ranch," Gloria said, and patted Jeff on the arm. "And don't be frightened, sheriff; we can go someplace where papa can't find us and then you can kiss me. Come, papa, I think that mother will have something to say to you when we get back home."

She went out, leaving Jeff feeling like a fool. He knew she was laughing at him. And he was a little confused. His ideas of western girls had come from a few dime novels of the Dead-Eye Dick variety and somehow this one didn't quite fit into the shrinking, violet-eyed category who demurely lowered their lids in front of a man.

Ab must have read his thoughts. "She's just about the dog-gondest woman anybody around here ever saw, Jeff," he said. "So don't pay any attention. I recollect I felt about the same way the first time I ever saw her help the boys in town rope a steer one Christmas and tie some firecrackers to its tail. She's a humdinger though, that Gloria. Well, seems to me you ought to go over to the store and do a little buyin'. You can get credit or I'll loan you some money. And there's the sheriff's guns over there on the wall. Hal Warren brought 'em in and hung 'em there when we went after his body. You might as well get used to wearin' them now."

"Thank you," Jeff said. "But if it's all the same to you, Ab, we'll let them hang right where they are for the present."

CHAPTER III

THE next few days opened up a new world to Jeff Gladstone. He began to see new values in people, of a kind he had never realized. People took a man at his word and that man's word was usually good. Jim Lewis, the judge, proved to be one of them. He fined Erd Stanner and the others fifty dollars apiece that Monday morning in court. The two ranchmen paid off and so did Poke Bird, whom the judge had got relieved of his town marshal job. Actually, Poke's job had been more of a night watchman until the small hours.

Hal Warren couldn't pay and Erd Stanner, now that Warren was of no further use to him, made no motion to pay his henchman's fine. Lewis fined him the fifty dollars and then gave him choice of twenty-five days in jail or twenty-five days of working around the town and courthouse. The former jailer sullenly agreed to work it out, though his burning eyes, filled with hate, seldom left Jeff Gladstone's face. Warren felt that the new sheriff was the cause of it all, and this same new sheriff was the one who had fired him out of a soft job within minutes after being elected. Jeff made a mental note that Warren would be a man to watch.

Ab had laid his crops by, and instead of going to work for one of the cow outfits for awhile, as was often done, agreed to stay on as deputy until Jeff "got the ropes," as Ab expressed it. Jeff spent days going through records and papers and sorting out old reward posters, some of them fifteen years old. The feud over the waterhole seemd to have quieted down. Stanner and Anson were frigidly polite to each other when they met in town, and their respective riders seemed content to let matters ride that way.

Jeff had taken over the dead sheriff's saddle but not his guns. He had bought, on credit, a pretty fair claybank pony from the local livery and was getting acquainted with the country and its people. He knew that he was a curiosity, but this worried him little. The people had elected him partly as a joke and mostly in derisive protest against Anson and Stanner's feud that was making the town unsafe for anybody else. And though Jeff was interested in trying to do a good job, he was more interested in a battle that was going on inside him. The craving for liquor had come, again and again, and there had been nights when he went to bed in his room in the hotel that he lay awake because his nerves were jangled. He hadn't taken a drink. Many men had tried to buy him one in the two local saloons. He had turned them all down, politely, and sometimes there was resentment.

One afternoon he saddled the horse and rode out of town, heading due west. He wore a flat brimmed hat now, smaller than most men wore, with shirt and corduroys. He couldn't as yet bring himself to wear high-heeled boots, feeling it might give him the appearance of a show-off. He wore work shoes and carried a repeating carbine on his saddle, taken from a rack in the office.

He rode west for four miles, consulting the crude map that Ab had drawn. It was mid-afternoon when he reached the disputed waterhole. It lay along a low swale with red bluffs some six or eight feet high rising above it. The water apparently came from large underground springs or a small river for there was quite a lot of it. It ran for about two hundred yards in length and was some sixty feet wide. All around were mesquites.

Jeff reined up for a minute and sat looking at the place. Ab had said that Bradley, the dead sheriff, had been found lying down at the lower end. He gigged the mount into movement and rode slowly down. Then the pony neighed, its head going up toward the mesquites on the low bluff above, and some instinct he wasn't certain of caused Jeff to duck.

THE rifle report came. Sharply. The horse leaped in fright and that might have saved his life when the second shot came. He was down over the horse now and snapping the carbine from its boot.

Jeff had handled hunting guns since youth, his father taking him on hunting trips to Canada for moose, deer, elk, and other big game. Some of this hunting had called for snap shooting on horseback and Jeff had had much practice. He drove a shot at movement in the mesquite and then drove two more. He heard a man curse that was a half yell and the crash of mesquites as the man apparently mounted. He caught a brief glimpse of a plunging horse and tried again, but the hoof beats grew dim in the distance.

Pursuit was useless. It was still a hundred yards to the end of the water and another hundred past the mud to the first break in the bluff. Mesquites spread for a mile and it was ideal for a pursued man to turn and pull an ambush.

Jeff slid the carbine back in its boot. He went over and dismounted, leaving the reins on the horse's neck. It promptly sidled off and turned its nose toward town, walking at a swift gait.

It didn't take him more than three minutes, watching its now fast trot, to realize that he was afoot. He returned, panting, to the water and laid down to get himself a drink. Hoofs sounded again and when he looked up Gloria Anson sat on her horse, a smile on her pretty face.

"Lesson number one," she said. "When you get off a cow horse anchor him by trailing the reins. If he's been given any good mannering at all, he won't move."

"Thank you," he replied politely.

"Number two. There wasn't any slicker back of the saddle. Better buy one at the store."

"Why? It's summer and not raining."

"It might start some night when you're twenty miles from town. But I suppose you'll learn the hard way," she sighed.

"I'll buy the slicker. Anything else for today?"

"Yes, darling. See that big brindle steer down there? If it wasn't for me on this cow pony you now would be standing waist deep in water and shouting 'shoo, shoo, you bad animal.' They don't like men on foot . . . even sheriffs."

"A lot of *people* don't either," he grinned. "That all for today?"

"Well," she hesitated, "you might try bringing Ab with you when you ride out here. It seems to be a very unhealthy place for sheriffs. And just where did you learn to handle a rifle like that?"

"Hunting."

"It's going to come in handy, I'd say, you poor darling," she said blandly.

"Will you kindly stop using the motherly attitude," he said, a little irritated at her calm brazenness. "I—"

"It wasn't motherly at all. I'm a brazen hussy. Everybody says so."

"And do you know what's going to happen to you one of these days?" he demanded.

"Yes," she said, grinning, her green eyes playing over him. "I've been waiting palpitatingly for years. When are you going to start, darling?"

He ground his teeth and put on his hat and changed the subject. She was laughing at him; feeling sorry for his helpless plight and ignorance. And he didn't want pity. He had spent enough time feeling sorry for himself during his sober moments on the way west, thinking of Hester.

Somehow Hester hadn't been much in his thoughts the last few days.

She rode over and reined in beside him, kicking a small, booted foot free of the stirrup, then extended a brown gloved hand. He swung up behind her. She reined her horse away and headed south.

"Town is the other direction," he reminded her. "And so is my horse."

HER words came back with the clean, womanly smell of her, mingled with a touch of perfume. "I know it. I was born out here and mostly raised, except for a couple of years of polishing in a school back east. I didn't polish very well," she added.

"That I believe. And now would you be kind enough either to overtake my horse or rope him for me?"

"I'm not a kind woman at all. The horse will get back to town easier than if you had ridden him, I bet. This is what you get for not coming to see us."

"I've got to get back to town," he insisted angrily. "I've got to get Ab and try to follow the tracks of the man who tried to ambush me back there."

"Dry gulch is the word we use out here, darling. It's more Texas. And you needn't bother about the man. I saw him. It was Hal Warren, riding Poke Bird's horse."

Her calmness and matter-of-fact announcement amazed him. Only the bobbing back of the horse kept his jaw from sagging. "Turn this horse toward town immediately," he snapped. "That's an order from the law."

"But we haven't got much law out here. I never heard a word you said."

And that was all the further he got. He started once, in sheer anger, to grab her, twist her around and start kissing her. He didn't because she either would smother him back or use that heavy quirt dangling from a gauntleted wrist. He had never met such a woman. He was angry—and baffled. Very baffled.

Gabe Anson's ranch lay two miles south of the waterhole and they rode in under cool cottonwoods past bunkhouse and barns and corrals to the main house. Jeff Gladstone saw men looking and heard snickers that sent the blood to his face. His stomach was at lowest ebb, with a constricted feeling, when Gloria reined up in front of the porch and looked at her father. Anson had just come from the kitchen, apparently, and made a pre-supper raid on the biscuit pan. He was munching a hot one, soaked in melted butter.

"I got me a man, papa," Gloria announced trimuphantly. "Had to chase him all over the north section but I finally run him down and captured him."

"What—" began Anson, and biscuit crumbs flew. He began to cough.

"Mr. Anson," Jeff began apologetically.

"He kissed me a lot," Gloria went on blandly. "He tried to attack me but I attacked him first. I'm a disgraced woman—"

"Great Godfrey!" exploded Gabe Anson, throwing up both hands. "What in the name of the devil am I going to do with you anyhow, Gloria? Ain't you got no—"

"Nope," cut in his daughter quite calmly. "Not a bit of pride. He wouldn't chase me so I chased him. I captured him too, didn't I, darling?"

"Gloria Anson," commanded a woman's voice from the doorway; a motherly looking woman of about fifty who wore an apron over her dress, "you get down off that horse and come in this house right now. I never heard the like of it in my life!"

"Yes, mother," Gloria said demurely. She lifted a split-skirted right leg up over the saddle horn and dropped off on the left side. Jeff Gladstone followed.

Mrs. Anson came forward and extended a hand. "Howdy, Mr. Gladstone, you're the new sheriff, aren't you? We're awfully glad to have you. Supper'll be ready in a few minutes."

"His horse ran away too," Gloria said, hugging her mother. "Next time he'll learn to trail the reins. A big steer was chasing him when I came up and I had to rescue the poor dear."

THAT was about as miserable a supper as Jeff had ever eaten. The food was of a wonderful kind he had never tasted before, but it was hard to get it down when Gloria, in a white dress that made her very beautiful, sat demurely across from him and old Gabe and Mrs. Anson tried to ease his obvious embarrassment. Gloria had said nothing about the attempted ambush and neither did Jeff. He knew that if Hal Warren got word that Gloria had seen him do the shooting it might mean danger to the girl. Jeff wanted to work the matter out his own way. He didn't know how. He wanted time to think.

They finished supper about dark and immediately afterward Anson had a team hooked to a buggy and drove the new sheriff into town. They were talking ranching. Old Gabe obviously was proud of his home, his daughter, and his ranch.

"We homesteaded this place of ourn a long time back, mother and me," Gabe Anson said. "We got two boys buried up on the hill, older than Gloria. One got kicked by a horse and the other just took sick and died. We had tough sledding for a few years till I got my iron on enough cows to start expanding."

"I thought a lot of this is open range country?" Jeff asked. He had studied much and Ab was a fountain of information who answered all questions.

"It is — or was until the damned nesters and farmers came in and started fencing."

"Just off hand, Mr. Anson, I'd say that a man like, for example, Ab Rondell, is a pretty good addition to this country."

Anson spat over the wheel and nodded, flicking the tip of the buggy whip on one of the horses. "You're right, Jeff. I'm an old time cowman but I admit it. I own most of my range through homesteading, so I'm one cowman as don't hate them."

He must have seen the puzzled look in Jeff Gladstone's eyes anent the homesteading remark. Under law a man could only file once. Jeff broached a question.

"Homesteading? Well," said Anson, "it works like this. I'd hire a rider and have him file where I told him. If he stayed three years with me, I bought his place at a set price, plus paying him riding wages. Of course, if he got tired and pulled stakes he lost out and another rider would file. I got a lot of acreage that way; choice grazing land. Erd Stanner bought most of his but he did the same thing."

"Why didn't one of you file on that disputed water up there?"

Anson handed over the lines and rolled himself a cigarette. "A good question, Jeff. But when I first came here I figured, naturally, that the creek was ten times better. Only found out in the years that followed that when the creek got low that danged hole never went down an inch. But it was still free and I figgered it would be a good idea for everybody to have it. Then Stanner came in. We both had plenty of water until this year—and it's kind of brackish anyhow."

"So I found out this afternoon," Jeff added dryly.

"It's got gypsum in it. Or 'Gyp' as we call it. Anyhow, Stanner took over and started hogging. By then neither of us dared to file for fear the other would open a range war. Neither of us need it except during dry years, such as now, and so we never fought over it."

"But why," Jeff persisted, "couldn't you have a man file on the quiet? Some nester, as you call them?"

Gabe Anson chuckled and took back the lines, setting the team into a jog trot again. "There ain't no farmer or anybody else in this country who would dare set foot on that piece of ground with me and Erd Stanner battling over it. I won't kill or allow it if possible, but if I knew a man had filed on that water, I'd take it for granted Erd Stanner was back of it; and I'd send about six riders over there to seive that homesteader's cabin full of holes and kind of hint to him that he better drag his chains."

They drove into town, which was dark and quiet, only a few lights showing. These came mostly from the two saloons. Anson stopped in front of one, to have a couple of drinks before heading back to the ranch. Jeff saw Poke Bird and Hal Warren inside in a poker game.

He declined Gabe Anson's offer of a drink and the ranchman stuck out his hand. "Glad to have you come out and visit us anytime, Jeff," he said.

Somehow Jeff didn't see the hand. He looked at Anson. "I'm not sure you'll want to extend that invitation much longer, Mr. Anson," he said.

"Why?"

"Because," answered Jeff quietly, "I'm going to file a homestead claim on that waterhole you and Erd Stanner are fighting over."

CHAPTER IV

HE WENT down the street a couple of minutes later, a little dazed and shaken at how suddenly a man could reverse his attitude. He felt sick in his midriff at the look that had come into Gabe Anson's range wise eyes. He went over to the courthouse and Ab Rondell rode up behind him. Ab was packing a gun and carried a rifle on his saddle. The deputy swung down, grinning his amiable grin.

"I just passed Swanson's saloon," he said. "Took a ride out to the waterhole after your horse came in to the livery with the reins up over the pommel. Dammit, Jeff, never tie your reins together. That way they'll drop to the ground and a horse will stand, in case you forget."

"I can take care of myself," Jeff grunted, a little shortly, leading the way into the office.

"Well, maybe," Ab said, still grinning in a way that caused Jeff Gladstone to grind his teeth. "But it wasn't too late for me to find tracks out there and I noticed that hoss heading south toward Anson's ranch was makin' deep tracks, like as how he was carrying double. No Anson rider would be foolin' around that waterhole. Nobody but a girl. Did she rope you and carry you off?" he inquired.

"Ab," Jeff Gladstone gritted, "if you don't get that grin off your face, I'm going to knock it off. She didn't carry me off . . . well, I was afoot, anyhow," he defended.

Ab reached into his pocket and brought forth several bright objects. They shone brassily in the light that Jeff had applied a match to. He reached into his other pocket and brought out two more.

"I brought the gun in off your saddle from the livery stable," Ab offered. "One shell left in it. I found these other two up in the mesquites. They're 25-35's, and the only man as owns one that I know of is Hal Warren. He never could shoot worth a hang anyhow."

"He must have done all right on Bradley," grunted out Jeff, trying to cover his amazement at Ab's knowledge.

It was Ab's turn to look surprised. "Huh?" he said.

"I think Warren is the man who shot Bradley. He might have done it because he hoped to get the sheriff's job. He might have done it because he knew something about Bradley, hanging around the jail as he did. Or he might have done it because Erd Stanner hired him to do it."

Ab had forgotten the shells in his hands. He sat looking at Jeff Gladstone, seeming to see something in his face that hadn't been in it a few days before. Jeff had certainly changed. Any man who would tell Gabe Anson to his face that he was filing on that waterhole . . .

"I saw Gabe down in the saloon when I rode by," he said, not quite able to collect his thoughts. "He was roaring some, I reckon. Cussing a blue streak, he was. What's this he was saying about you committing suicide by filing on that place out there where Bradley was shot?"

"That's right," Jeff said, and went to the desk. "Might as well make application now. You'll have to help me. The application, I would imagine, will go to the land office."

He began to rummage in his desk. He had gone through most of the stuff in a methodical search for information pertaining to a sheriff's various duties. But a couple of drawers had not as yet been reached and now he opened them. Bradley should have some stationery around somewhere.

BRADLEY didn't have any courthouse stationery handy but an envelope did catch Jeff's eye. It looked new and white, in contrast to most of them. Jeff pulled it out, his eyes widening at the sight of the printing in the corner. It was from the state land office.

Jeff pulled out a single slip of paper. It was a land recorder's receipt; and as he read his amazement increased. He handed it over to Ab and Ab read slowly. Then he lowered the paper.

"Great God, Jeff," he almost whispered. "This is a fee on that waterhole out there as sure as I'm alive. A receipt from the recorder's office. Old Bradley *filed on that* water himself not three weeks ago."

"What do you suppose it means?"

"It means one thing: that Hal Warren, working here as flunkey and jailer when there were any prisoners, knew about it. He must have. And I'll bet my last bottom dollar that he either killed Bradley on account of it, for some reason, or he went to Erd Stanner and blabbed and Stanner hired the job done. I don't suppose we'll ever know just why Bradley filed. He had been sheriff here for fifteen years and was a pretty good one, it being a pretty quiet county. Maybe he was getting ready to retire. Or maybe he thought the one way to stop this feud between Stanner and Anson was to get control of that water."

He took the receipt, studied it again, and a low whistle escaped him. "Jeff, this is the damndest thing I ever heard of. It hasn't got any name on it. Just the *sheriff* of this county. Hell's fire! That means *any sheriff!*"

"I think," Jeff said, deadly gentleness in his voice, "that it meant Bradley was after that waterhole for the county until this feud was settled. He might have—"

Ab Rondell suddenly slapped his leg. "By Godfrey, Jeff, now I've got it!" he breathed out. "A week before Brad was killed he bought a shack here in town. An old busted down one for twenty dollars. Offered me twenty dollars to bring in my team and a running gear to move it. Didn't say where. Just winked and said he'd tell me when I got time to do the job. Hell's bells. Homestead laws says you got to have a certain sized shack on land; 'improvement' and such. Hal Warren knew about that."

"Then it was murder," came the reply.

Ab nodded soberly. "All we got to do now is prove it. All you got to find out, after you prove it, is why."

"Let's take a walk," Jeff Gladstone said, rising.

"Where?"

"To Hal Warren's shack or wherever he lives."

They moved out into the darkness and toward town. Jeff saw, as they crossed the street, that Gabe Anson's team and buggy were still in front of the saloon. Ab said, "There's Hal still playing poker. And there's some of Erd Stanner's horses at the hitch rail. Not many come in during week nights. I don't like the looks of this, Jeff!"

"Neither do I," Jeff answered.

They found Hal Warren's shack not far away, abutting a narrow alley of barbed wire near an abandoned corral. While Ab stood guard outside Jeff slipped in, closed the door, and cupped a match in his hands. Its pale glow revealed an unmade bunk of smelly blankets, a broken down stove, dirty dishes piled on the table. The floor had gone unswept for weeks. The sight gave Jeff satisfaction. He was looking for something and a man of sloppy habits such as the cabin displayed might help him find it.

Then he saw the gun, in a corner by a saddle. The saddle blankets were still damp and a sniff at the barrel told him what he had been pretty certain of: that Hal Warren was too slovenly to clean the weapon after firing.

THEY took the weapon back to Jeff's office in the courthouse. There was a shell in the chamber and two more in the magazine. Most lever action guns, Jeff remembered, were five shot. It seemed to fit all right, when he levered one out of the chamber and then two more from the magazine.

"It still don't prove nothing," Ab said.

Jeff said nothing. He had one of the shells in his hand and was pressing the bullet hard against the edge of the desk. He worked it loose, extracted the lead, poured out the powder into a spittoon, and then placed the empty shell in the chamber.

"Hmm," Ab said thoughtfully as the gun gave off a weak report from the exploded primer. "I forgot about that. Good boy, Jeff."

Jeff Gladstone ejected the shell and picked up a magnifying glass he had found among Bradley's office effects. He compared the dent in the primer with those in the two 25-35 shells Ab had picked up in the mesquites.

"It was pretty dumb of Hal not to pick up them shells after he levered 'em out," Ab observed, taking over glass and the empties. He squinted. "But I guess he was slopin' pretty fast, you throwin' lead like that. Yep, the dents are identical. These and Gloria's testimony are all Jim will need when we put Hal on trial."

"It still doesn't prove he killed Bradley," Jeff said. "But let's go down and get him, Ab. I've got some thinking to do."

"Me too," Ab replied, rising. "My wife says I either got to come on back out there and start running the place again or she's going to throw over the whole she-bang and move in town with the kids. I got plenty of thinking to do."

They went down the street to the saloon to arrest the man who had tried to kill Jeff that afternoon. The town was pretty quiet. The stars were out and somehow the stars looked different from his hotel window when he lay awake at night than they had looked when he headed for the Gladstone town house in New York at four o'clock in the morning, pretty high from an all night carousing. He liked this new country; and he wondered then if the fact that Gloria Anson's impudent face with those green eyes being before him these last few hours had anything to do with it. Jeff shrugged off the thought.

They stopped outside the saloon, pausing to look in through the window. Some of Erd Stanner's riders were playing poker. Stanner himself was over by the bar. He was looking coldly at Gabe Anson, who was a little high.

"Go right ahead and roar your head

off, Gabe," Erd Stanner was saying in his soft voice. "Get indignant about that cheap dude filing on the waterhole. But you're wasting your time on *me*. It's a slick frameup between you and him. You lost out on the election—same as me—but you didn't lose anytime getting that dumb easterner to file on that water."

"You calling me a liar?" roared Gabe belligerently, moving toward him.

Six of Erd Stanner's riders had got up from the table. They were packing pistols, though neither Stanner nor Anson were armed. One of the men, small and wiry with watery eyes, had moved in close by Stanner; and Ab Rondell's whisper came jerkily in Jeff's ear.

"That's Fred LeGrand — Frenchy, they call him. He's been with Stanner about three months now, ever since this trouble started. Layin' low up here on account of a couple of other killings down close to Eagle Pass; and drawing gun fighter pay, so I've heard."

"I'm calling you a liar," Stanner said calmly. "I'm calling you a damned water-hogging, trouble-hunting liar," and something in the way he said it told Jeff Gladstone that it was a frameup.

He had met Stanner only two or three times since that day in the jail. The man was too quiet and spoke too softly to lose his temper that way. He seemed to have been waiting an opportune moment to get Gabe Anson into this kind of a position, and now it was plain. It was very plain with Frenchy LeGrand standing close by and the other riders spreading into the clear back of the little man. They knew Stanner was unarmed but Gabe Anson might have a gun on him, inside his shirt.

JEFF GLADSTONE stepped through the front door as old Gabe lunged. He saw Frenchy LeGrand's hand calmly pulling a pistol from its holster at his hip, and he knew that the hammer of the carbine in his own hands had the hammer back, far back under his thumb. He made the kind of snap shot he had made that afternoon; the kind he had made hunting big game in Canada. He saw Frenchy go down queerly, both hands clapped to his side, and he yelled a sharp order to them all.

"Don't a man of you move," he snapped. "Every man stand fast."

Old Gabe wheeled on him. He started to roar and Jeff cut him short too, his eyes boring into Stanner's.

"Shut up, Anson. Don't you know a frameup when you see one?"

"Frameup?" grunted out the rancher.

Jeff said to Stanner, "You've just about overplayed your hand, Stanner," and was surprised at the words. A few weeks before he wouldn't have known what they meant.

Stanner was still by the bar; still unperturbed. He was ignoring the grunting Frenchy on the floor, ignoring Hal Warren, ignoring Ab Rondell standing beside Jeff with a six shooter held carelessly at his hip. He was unperturbed but there was ice in his eyes.

"I once gave you forty-eight hours to get out of this town, and then changed my mind and decided to let you stay, figuring you were harmless," he said. "I now find out differently. You've butted in as a freak sheriff. You've taken sides with Anson in this water deal. And now, using that badge as a shield, you've shot one of my men down in cold blood."

"Ha, ha," Ab observed dryly and with no laugher, watching LeGrand get to his feet and stagger to the bar, where he leaned weakly against it. "I wish somebody would go over and with one finger play some sad music on that pianner so I can bust down and start crying over this poor damned murderin' killer who got plugged trying to draw the gun fighter wages you pay him. Ha, ha!"

"I'm giving you until daylight to leave town, Gladstone," Stanner said in his almost meek voice. "I've got eighteen riders on my ranch who'll jump when I give the order. And if you're in this town by sunup tomorrow morning, they'll jump."

Hal Warren came up, looking at Jeff. He sneered. "Yo're big stuff with that carbine in your hands, ain't you?" he said.

"A lot bigger than I was this afternoon when you tried to ambush me out there at the waterhole, Warren. Only you missed me. You didn't miss Bradley. It must have made you careless after you shot Bradley. It was too easy. You should have picked up the empty shells from that 25-35 Ab and I just took from your cabin and checked a few minutes ago."

Hal Warren's face turned color. Something like a half choking gasp went out of him. He shot a quick look at Stanner, then covered his fear with another sneer.

"You're crazy," he bluffed. "I was in town all afternoon. My hoss was in the corral at my place all day."

"It's no use, Warren. You rode Poke Bird's horse. Gloria Anson saw you when you tried the ambush. Put the cuffs on him, Ab. Take these of mine and hook up him and Poke Bird to Stanner while I watch these other men. I'll get LeGrand under the armpits and bring him along."

CHAPTER V

THEY filled the jail that evening, leaving Stanner's six sullen, uncertain riders behind in Swanson's saloon. Jeff Gladstone wasn't too worried about them. Men follow leadership and without Stanner's leadership they probably wouldn't take concerted action. It would be taken for granted that one or all of the six riders would streak it for Stanner's ranch to break the news to the others that the owner had been arrested.

But this angle of the case worried Jeff little. His mind was wrestling with a hundred other details. He knew that Jim Lewis, in the face of the evidence Jeff and Ab and Gloria Anson could offer, would convict Warren. Lewis would give him about fifteen years in the state penitentiary and that would be all very well. Yet this would not clear up the murder of Bradley, nor would it involve Erd Stanner.

And Jeff had little compunction about Stanner. He knew the man, in some way, was tied up with both the murder of the other sheriff and the afternoon attempt upon Jeff's life. Hal Warren would have told Stanner everything, including the news that Bradley had filed on the waterhole. The more Jeff thought about it the more he was certain that the ex-jailer and deputy would not simply have gone out and shot the sheriff down in the hopes of getting his job. Bradley had served for many years and served well. Even in the event of his death, Warren would have known that he couldn't get the old sheriff's job. Subsequent events had proven this . . . in the election, and Jeff's unexpected elevation to the post right out of a clear sky.

No; Hal Warren was guilty. Of that there now seemed little doubt in Jeff's mind. The job now was to make him confess. If he would confess, it would involve Stanner, and the case would be complete. Jeff had seen the look of fear on Warren's face—had seen the look he shot at Stanner when informed that he was under arrest on charges of trying to kill the new sheriff.

Frenchy LeGrand was stretched out on his back on the floor of the jail when Ab arrived with the doctor. Jeff Gladstone somehow felt sorry for the man. He didn't look like a gunman, nor a killer. He hadn't pulled his pistol so much as he had awkwardly clawed it out of the holster. His slowness had been one reason why Jeff had managed to get the carbine into action so fast. This thing had been in Jeff's mind all the way up to the courthouse.

The doctor was a fussy little family man who didn't waste much time. He opened his bag beside the recumbent figure and brought out a pint of whiskey. He gave Frenchy a whale of a snort and Frenchy coughed a little.

"Shut up," said the busy medico.

Buttons flew as he jerked the shirt free. He yanked at the belt and buttons on the wounded man's pants. "Shut up," he said again, as Frenchy LeGrand groaned. "If there's anything that gives me grey hairs it's young mothers having their first babies and you dod-blasted gun packers squalling like kids when you get bored."

"I'm . . . not squalling," got out the wounded man.

"Well, you ain't dead yet."

"Awww, Doc," protested Ab disgustedly. "You mean he ain't going to *die?*"

"Not now; some day perhaps," snorted the medico.

"But couldn't you sort of tell him so? We want to get a confession outa him that Erd hired him to salivate Gabe Anson tonight, and dog-gone it you're spoiling the business."

"He isn't going to die, dammit. He's only got a couple of ribs smashed out and a chunk of meat torn loose. He'll have a blank spot in his side that will be pretty soft for a few years—until the hangman gets him—get him he will, someday!"

THE LITTLE doctor was fussing with vaseline, smearing it on bandages. Jeff knelt beside Frenchy LeGrand. He somehow felt very sorry for the man. And he was a little sick over the shooting.

"Frenchy," he said, "I sent Gabe Anson back to his ranch and wouldn't let him come up here tonight because he might have tried to kill you. He's a fine man until he gets a few too many drinks under his belt. But if you'll turn state's evidence, I'll go to bat for you in court. I think Erd Stanner hired you to kill Anson. I think that business down there in Swanson's a few minutes ago was a frameup for cold blooded murder. Was it?"

The little man's watery eyes, somehow bright, looked at Jeff Gladstone. He didn't look like a man who could, or would, kill any man. The doc was busy now, using scissors to clip away a two-inch strip of dangling flesh that had a small piece of bone hanging to it. Frenchy wasn't flinching now. He whispered:

"I had to kill two men down near Eagle Pass, sheriff. I had good reasons, no mistake about that. I shot them dead. But they were friends of a ratty sheriff and I had to run. They branded me a gunman. But I'm not really one. I'm not a cow puncher either, sheriff. I couldn't rope a steer at ten feet with a twenty-foot loop. But I had to have some kind of a job . . . and I've a grudge against the law. So I took Stanner's job at his ranch. He soon found out I'm not a cow puncher. But he didn't know I wasn't a gunman because I never used it, my eyes always being bad. That's why I worked as a clerk in a mercantile store. So I took a job on his ranch. I figured I might as well go out that way. You see . . . sheriff, sometimes the cards are stacked against a man from birth, like being born with weak eyes."

"Frenchy, shut up!" snarled Erd Stanner's voice from the cell, and it wasn't soft now. "He's out of his head, Doc. That whiskey. He's drunk. He doesn't know what he's saying."

Frenchy turned his head enough to look at Stanner, and he smiled faintly. "Don't worry, Stanner. I'm not talking. I want time to think this thing over."

"I'll 'give him time' to think it over," grunted Hal Warren's voice from the second cell, "if I ever get out of here."

"You're not going to get out," Jeff said, rising. "Are you ready to talk?"

Warren sneered. He was good at sneering. "Don't waste yore time on me, Mister. I'm a little sore at Stanner for not paying my fine the other day, but I don't squeal. And get this, Mister *Sheriff,* I've got a few cards I ain't played yet and don't you forget it. I'll remind you again of that sooner than you think—from behind a gun."

Frenchy had fainted from pain and the whiskey; he was out, this tragic little ex-store clerk who had, in a moment of desperation, killed and been branded a gunman, when he was no more of a gunman than Jeff Gladstone himself.

The doctor finished his job. There was no hospital, so Ab got two Winchesters from the rack and used a blanket, wrapping the guns in the edges. They closed up the jail, turned out the lights, and carried Frenchy's slight form down town to a room in the hotel. Ab walked in front, gripping the barrels and Jeff came along behind, holding the stocks. Frenchy lay in the blanket between the guns, groaning a little but still unconscious.

"I think, Ab, that I need a drink," Jeff said, when they came downstairs. And to the clerk: "Keep an eye on him occasionally through the night, in case he wants a drink of water."

AB LOOKED at him queerly as they headed for Swanson's to see what had happened to Erd Stanner's riders and to get the drink. "You're learin' fast," Ab said. "Any good man needs a drink now and then."

"Some men," Jeff said and then, as they crossed the street, he told Ab of his home and why he didn't want to drink anymore. "I wanted to get my self respect back, Ab," he finished simply.

"Well," Ab replied in his slow way as they entered Swanson's, "you've got mine anyhow. And Gloria Anson's too, I'm thinking. You're okay, Jeff."

The place was pretty well deserted. The few curious had had their curiosity satisfied and gone. Ab and Jeff drank at the bar. Somehow the liquor didn't taste as good to Jeff Gladstone as it would have tasted two weeks before.

They were on their second when the clerk from the hotel hit the front door and dashed in. His face was ashen. "Sheriff—Ab, they've just killed Frenchy! Shot him in his room!"

"Who?" shot out Jeff.

"Hal Warren and Poke Bird. Hal had an extra key to the cells hid in his boot, he told me so. Hal was on the warpath—saying something about Gloria Anson . . . hey, wait a minute, I ain't finished!"

"Ab, hit for the stable and get my horse," Jeff ordered. "Meet me at the courthouse where we left yours. We're heading for Gabe Anson's ranch. We haven't got a second to lose and we'll have to ride like hell to make it."

They went out of town in a matter of minutes and Jeff was thankful that a moon was coming up. It showed the road ahead, and Jeff kept straining his eyes for sight of the buggy. Old Gabe Anson had been pretty mad and pretty drunk when he left town and Jeff hoped that he would romp the team back pretty fast. If Poke Bird and Warren overtook him. . . .

Poke Bird might have been Gabe Anson's boot licker once, but his loaning Warren his horse to offset suspicion seemed to prove that the former marshal definitely had thrown in his lot with Stanner following the election.

They covered that four miles south and west of town as fast as the horses could make it without killing them. There wasn't any gunfire when they loped in to the yard. Nor had Jeff expected any. Those two men bent on stopping Gloria's testimony at Hal Warren's trial hardly could be expected to attack the ranch with all of Gabe's riders there. And yet the silence was ominous.

"There's Gabe's buggy down by the bunkhouse," Ab grunted as they swung down. "Bet the old walrus is roaring his head off to his hands. I—"

And then the scream came from within the house. It sounded to Jeff like it might be from Gloria's mother. He was across the porch in a bound and into the front room. It was deserted but the scream came again from upstairs and Jeff took the carpeted stairway in long legged bounds with Ab at his heels, a six shooter in his hand. A door was open and Jeff hit the room. He saw a number of things at a glance. An open window with a big cottonwood limb over the ledge where Hal Warren had climbed up, and he saw Gloria struggling in the arms of Hal Warren, a knife in the desperado's hand. Warren apparently had intended to make a silent job of it.

"Hal!" yelled Jeff and leaped at him, carbine in hand.

He swung the gun, awkwardly, and the barrel struck the snarl-contorted ex-deputy's face, knocking him backward. Warren dropped the knife and Jeff dived at him. He struck once and the both of them went through the open window, out onto the sloping roll of the eave. They came up against the limb, on the edge of the eave, and Warren drove a desperate fist into his chest. Jeff grunted, switched holds to get his hand free, and struck savagely at that hate filled, fear ridden face.

WARREN'S body dropped off, backward, and hit the ground with a thud. Jeff grabbed desperately at the limb, tore skin from his clawing hand from its rough bark, and went off into space. Luckily, he fell feet first; and his feet landed squarely in the ex-jailer's recumbent midriff. Jeff rolled clear, heard Ab's roar of warning followed by the double report of his six shooter.

Ab was leaning out the window, the gun in his hand, and Jeff turned sick all over when he saw Poke Bird's body beside two horses whose reins were still gripped in one fast relaxing paw.

Thank God, went through Jeff's mind, I didn't have to kill a man.

They got Warren into the house with a broken back. He talked now, between groans of pain; about learning of Bradley filing on the water for the county and running to Erd Stanner. Of getting a thousand cash for the killing of Bradley—money he spent gambling and losing back to Stanner and his riders. Of trying to earn another thousand by murdering Jeff the first time he left town.

The room seemed to be filled with Anson riders, all with guns. Old Gabe was there, still pretty drunk and still roaring until Mrs. Anson quieted him down. Gloria came down in night gown and woolly slippers.

"Where's Stanner?" Jeff demanded.

"Where else . . . would he be but at his ranch?" grunted Warren. "The dirty scum wouldn't come with us to do . . . this job. He'll be waiting out there for you with his riders and his . . . guns."

"And we'll be out there in the morning with all of Anson's riders and a posse of one hundred citizens," Jeff answered grimly. "And Stanner's riders won't fight those odds. I know men that much."

Gloria went over and linked her arm into her father's, looking at Jeff admiringly. "I saved his life, papa," she said to old Gabe. "Hal Warren had him down on the floor and was choking him when I pulled him off and threw him out the window. I saved his life, so he's got to marry me, the poor helpless darling."

Jeff straightened from above Warren, a glint in his eye as he looked at her. He rolled up his right sleeve. "You said you've been waiting for years," he said grimly, "and now you're going to get what you've needed."

"Why, you poor helpless—oh! Papa, papa!"

Old Gabe pushed her away with a roar. "Go after her, son," he bellowed. "Whale the daylights out of her."

Gloria shrieked and fled up the stairs and Jeff went after her, grabbing wildly. From within the room came loud whacking blows followed by more shrieks and finally Gabe Anson started up. He reached the top of the landing and looked in the door. The shrieks had stopped all of a sudden. He turned and came down again.

"He ain't whipping her anymore," he snorted disgustedly to the grinning Ab and the others. "Allus knew he didn't have much sense. If he had he wouldn't be kissing her that way."

THE END

CITY OF GOLD

THE CRY of "Gold!" brought men from every corner of the world and poured them into sunny California. The ships of all the seven seas converged there dropping their human cargo on that western shoreline. Americans from Chicago's Halsted Street, from Hester Street, from the Bronx, from Brooklyn, Newark, Philadelphia, and from the farmlands of the East made the journey westward in search of easy riches. Hawaiians, South Americans, Chinese with dangling queues mingled with men from Oregon and Maine. A question put in English might be answered in German, Spanish, Italian, Russian or Chinese. California was truly the "melting pot" of the world of the 1850's.

At that time San Francisco was in its hey-day. It rose overnight and was an ugly sight to behold. About half the buildings were of canvas, and most of them were used for gambling houses and hotels. Some of the old, worn-out ships that had made San Francisco their last port, were dragged up on dry land and used as buildings. The streets were thick masses of mud, some so deep and dangerous that people had been known to drown in them. One public-spirited citizen was thoughtful enough to warn the trusting souls that might have followed him to his fate with the sign, "This street is impassable, not even jackassable." Planks were sometimes thrown across a thoroughfare to serve as foot bridges, as lumber was extremely expensive in those days, it was not an unusual sight to see streets bridged with sacks of flour, rows of iron stoves, or filled tobacco crates.

San Francisco was not much of a city during the gold rush days. Gambling and drinking were the only pastimes the miners indulged in during their stay in the town. The glittering gambling hall was the center of community activity, honest and otherwise. Men thought nothing of shooting their pistols just for fun and to give the innocent bystanders a scare. Horseback riders clattered yelling and cursing through the streets at a mad gallop at all hours of the night. But the number of conservative citizens began to grow, good homes appeared, and there were many who had regular jobs undemoralized by fluctuating fortunes in gold and speculation.

Soon these people banded together to protect themselves against the unruly and murderous elements in the town. Robberies and murders were promptly paid for in execution and imprisonment; sentences were imposed by the gallant Vigilante Committee bringing justice and law to bear upon the rougher sections of the population.

By the thousands men came to San Francisco from all corners of the globe a second time. They were not searching for gold but for something far more valuable and difficult to gain and keep—peace on earth.

—Willis Patman Wiley

FASTEST MAN IN THE WEST

IN THE days when the west was overrun with hostile Indians and teeming with herds of buffalo, there were white men who made a business out of adventure. These were the men of the saddle who helped make possible the Pony Express.

Before the Pony Express itself had become a reality, men were vying with each other to establish speed records on horseback over well-known trails. Famous horsemen from the entire West often gathered at the market center in Santa Fe and there would spin their yarns.

A French Canadian trader in the region, Aubrey, by name, often took part in these discussions. In many more ways than the other men he led a settled life. He had a business of his own; many of the wagon trains which rumbled back and forth along the great Western trails belonged to him. It would have meant a quiet and pleasant existence if Aubrey had been content just to sit back and reap the profits.

However, Aubrey was not the type of man who could let things happen around him without taking a personal part in the proceedings.

Riding up and back along the established trails, Aubrey broke many a speed record. The trail distance between the famous California settlements of Independence and Santa Fe were estimated to be about 780 miles. Ox teams never made the trip in less than two or three months and horses were expected to cover the same distance in three weeks. It only took Aubrey two weeks to complete the trip, but he was far from satisfied with this astounding feat. He set out to better this record.

Aubrey knew every inch of ground along the Santa Fe Trail. He knew the whereabouts of springs and quicksands and could gauge his mileage by the natural landmarks he recognized on his journey. Often he would push on at night and be able to find his way by starlight, he was so confident.

When Aubrey reduced his own record to eight days, people really became interested in him, for one hundred miles on horseback for eight consecutive days was unparalleled in those times. His own announcement that the real test was yet to come, that his next attempt would be to cover the same distance in six days—or less, made the people gasp in astonishment. He believed that through the use of relays of horses the deed could be done and done successfully without any hardship.

The idea was an entirely new one, and many people could not put much faith in it. Aubrey would be forced to endure at least six days without rest; it was a question of human endurance. There was always the possibility of not passing through the hostile Indian territory safely. If a man was lucky he might get through without losing his scalp, but then he could never be sure that his relays of horses had not been run off or stolen by the Indians. Although many men voiced their doubts and voiced them loudly, everyone was interested in the outcome. Bets were laid; Aubrey himself was party to a wager which involved $1,000.

There were two routes which he could follow. Aubrey chose the southern route which happened to be more direct but was more treacherous and had been the scene for many Indian massacres.

Aubrey started from Santa Fe on a brisk September day in 1848. There were many places along the journey where he could easily have been ambushed, but he galloped onward. His most desperate struggle was pitted against his overwhelming need for sleep and rest. Most of his meals were snatched from the men who waited for him at relay stations. Sometimes food was generously offered by the occupants of a covered wagon as he passed.

After the trip had begun Aubrey realized that he had set up the relay stations too far apart; there were not enough of them and on many of the laps the horses were nearly dead from exhaustion. He was able to gain help from the wagon trains he passed; several times a stranger loaned his horse for the venture and Aubrey was able to continue. Interest in the race against time and human endurance was higher than ever.

Aubrey was triumphant. He reached Independence in five and one-half days, but was so fatigued that he had to be lifted from the saddle. For twenty hours afterwards he slept without moving a muscle.

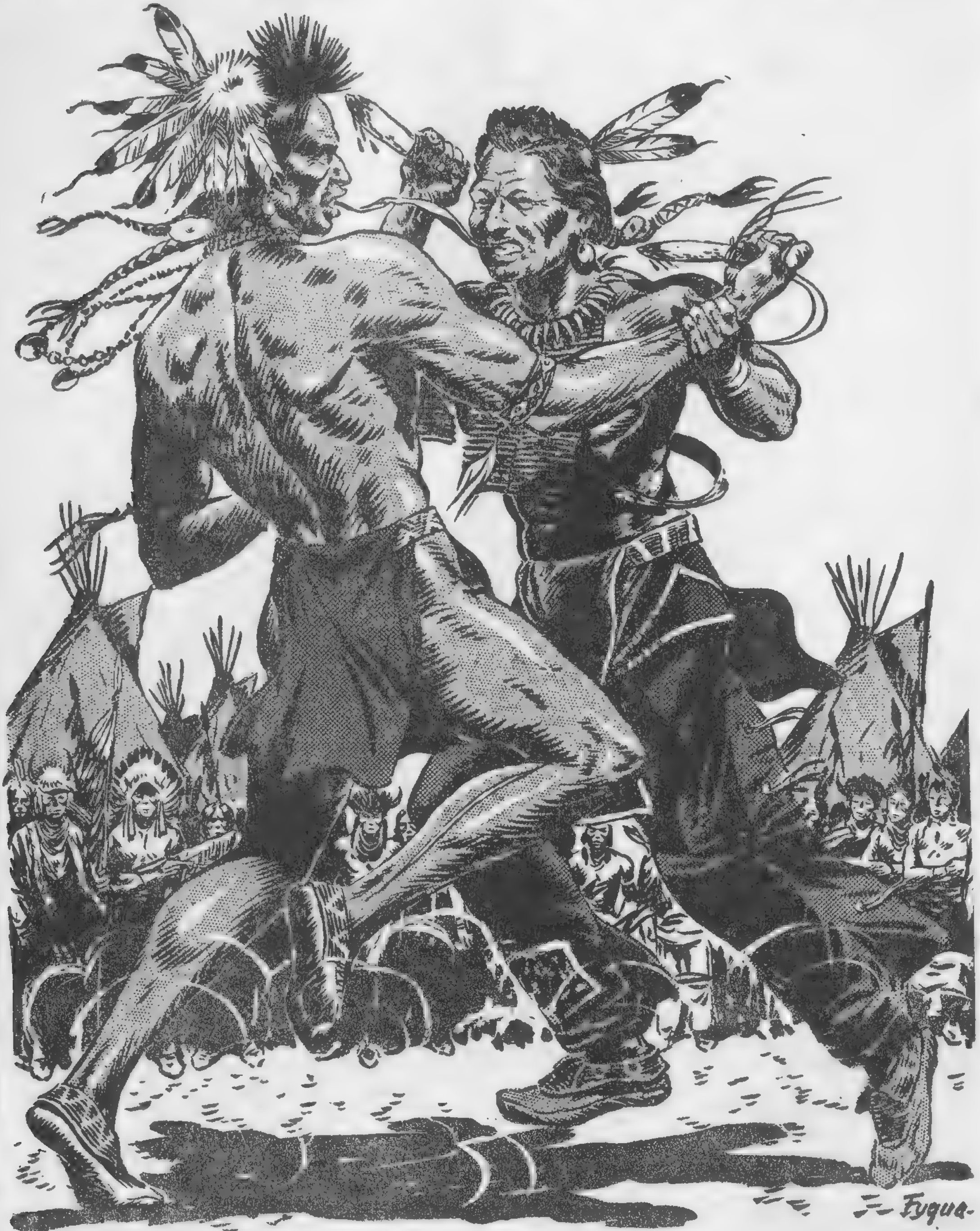
He made several long trips after that one but none of his later rides were gauged against time. After his death, Aubrey's fame lived on.

When the trails began to extend more completely over the heretofore untraveled West, the subject of speedier and more efficient communication became the most important topic of conversation. Communication between the East and West was absolutely necessary.

Aubrey's idea of relays provided the key, the method of solving the great problem of covering thousands of miles without overtaxing the strength of either horse or rider. The mighty conclusion was reached. The Pony express was the only answer. Riders as well as horses were to be changed at designated intervals along the trail.

True enough, the risk from Indian attack still remained, but the essential means of covering the distance was established. The men were brave and anxious to begin. Every community had at least one daring horseman who was itching for the opportunity to take part in this new scheme. Would the risks involved turn them from this glimpse of excitement? Not these men. Adventure was their business.—*Sandy Miller.*

The Pride of Swift Pony



Swift Pony saw the look of hate in Long Arrow's eyes as the knife slashed down at him

by Leonard Finley Hilts

Swift Pony met defeat at the hands of his enemy and lost his rank of Chief. But even a beaten man retains his pride.

SWIFT PONY stood silent and majestic in the center of the clearing, unaware of the noise and tension in the atmosphere around him. His face, angular and sharply chiseled, was composed and emotionless. He held his body stiff and straight, with his chin high and his arms pressed close to his sides. In caverns shaded by heavy brows, his eyes were a calm, deep brown.

The clamor of the tribe's animated conversations, as they sat cross-legged around the pounded dirt floor of the clearing, rose over the scene like a mythical cloud of dust. Tension pyramided on tension until it seemed that the very air would have to snap. Every eye in the crowd eagerly scanned the circle, waiting and watching.

Swift Pony remained like a detached spirit aloof to the noise and tension. His unwavering gaze was fixed on the man standing across the clearing from him with folded arms and a slight smile.

Long Arrow had assumed a careless, lounging pose with one knee bent slightly. An aura of confidence enshrouded him and radiated through the clearing. His face was oval and set off by flaring nostrils and a sharply pointed chin. In deep sockets set wide apart, his eyes glowed almost jet black. The sinews in his arms and legs stood out like knots in a heavy rope.

Swift Pony knew that Long Arrow's half-smile wasn't intended for the crowd. It was to taunt him, to remind him of the meaning of this scene.

There was bitterness working within Swift Pony, though none of it showed on his unimpassioned features. A chief himself, the son of a long line of chiefs, he was now faced with a humiliation that trampled his pride.

For generations the supreme rulership of the tribe had been handed from father to son by popular acclaim. From his earliest days Swift Pony had been trained by his father in preparation for the day on which he would assume the command from him. A born and trained leader, he had pointed his every action toward the day when his turn would come.

And now this!

His father had been killed leading a bold raid against a warring tribe to the north. Swift Pony had immediately taken command of the expedition, completed the raid and brought them home when it was over. No thought but that he would be acclaimed supreme chief on their arrival in the camp had ever entered his mind.

BUT there was a delay. Some days elapsed after the return of the raiding party before the proclamation was made. And during that time Swift Pony felt a change in the wind. Gradually he became aware of the fact that he wouldn't be made chief in a noisy, unanimous proclamation.

A usurper with a loose, bragging tongue had been quietly campaigning since the old chief's death and his talk was beginning to tell. The opinion of the tribe wavered at first, and then a sharp rift showed. Finally two well-defined cliques emerged.

One claimed that Swift Pony, on the strength of his background as well as his previously exhibited physical prowess, should be the new chief. The other said that Long Arrow was Swift Pony's physical equal, and that because his father was a good leader was no sign that Swift Pony would be one.

The altercation grew until it began to affect the unity of the tribe and then the elders of the tribe had stepped in. Men too old to be active leaders and to go out on campaigns, they were depended upon to render decisions because of their aged wisdom and experience. They said now that the rulership of the tribe had never been handed from father to son, but had passed each time to the most promising leader. It had just happened that for the past few generations the best leaders had been members of the same family.

Now that a challenger had come forward, they would revert to the tribe's ancient custom of selecting a chief from among all of the young chiefs of the tribe. An athletic festival would be held and the man who showed himself to be superior to all others would be proclaimed great chief.

Although thirty of the young men had competed, the contests actually proved to be a fight between Swift Pony and Long Arrow. They had proved themselves equal in all things except two. Long Arrow had shown himself to be the best bowman in the tribe, with Swift Pony second. And Swift Pony had easily outdistanced everyone in the foot-races. The shorter legs of Long Arrow brought him in second.

Now the games were over. Both men stood in the middle of the winner's circle. Swift Pony was bitter at the necessity of it, but stood his ground with a regal demeanor. Long Arrow gloated that he had proved himself Swift Pony's equal and exhibited his confident smirk to all.

At the far end of the clearing the elders of the tribe sat in conference. They formed a tight circle of their own, separated from the throng. With palms clasped together and bodies inclined toward each other, they conferred quietly. The only movement among them was the gentle undulating of their lips in their creased, leathery faces.

The discussion was a long one. As it continued and their announcement was delayed, the noise and excitement of the crowd increased. When the decision did not come quickly to Swift Pony as everyone had expected, the wagering on Long Arrow rose and his faction became more confident.

THE onlookers began measuring the two competitors, as if by comparison of the two they could tell what the decision of the elders would be. They saw Swift Pony, tall and lean, with long, supple muscles showing smoothly under his burned skin, and felt the dignity that surrounded him.

And they saw the cocky attitude of Long Arrow. He was shorter then Swift Pony, but gave the impression of being the bigger man physically because of his heavier build. His chest was deep and his arms and legs were thick with knotted muscles.

Finally, when it seemed that the crowd wouldn't wait another second, one of the elders arose, broke the tiny circle and walked slowly across the clearing toward the two young chiefs. Immediately, like a sodden blanket dropped on a fire, a strained silence dropped on the crowd. All eyes followed the faltering progress of the old man.

When he stood between the two younger men he waved them closer and placed a withered hand on the shoulder of each.

"My sons," he began in a sonorous, unimpassioned voice that, though it wavered and cracked with age, carried the full authority of experience, "you have both done well. We are fortunate to have among us two such brave and accomplished warriors." His words came out slowly and every man in the clearing leaned forward to watch his lips.

Long Arrow's eyes darted for a moment from the old man's face to that of Swift Pony. The corners of his mouth tilted into a smirk. To hear himself praised along side of Swift Pony was music to his ears. There was no movement on Swift Pony's regal face.

"Our decision has been a difficult one," the elder continued, "but it has been made. Swift Pony and Long Arrow, we declare that you shall rule our tribe together and that your decisions shall be binding upon us. . . ."

The roar of the crowd cut him off. The decision had not been expected. No one had considered the possibility of co-chieftans and the tribe's surprise showed in the spontaneity of the yell.

The old man held up his hand for silence and waited until the ringing shout had died away and order was once more restored.

"We realize that for the good of the tribe it is not wise to have two men ruling. Therefore, we also declare that every three moons there shall be games and these games shall be held until one man can clearly be chosen as our chief."

The crowd roared again and the old man waved the crowd to dismissal.

Swift Pony stood motionless after the announcement. The elder's words had been a swift painful blow to him. He had believed that the council of elders, when faced with the decision, would choose him over Long Arrow because of his training and background. He was equal to Long Arrow in athletic events, but he was superior to him in these other things. He remained staring at the ground, stunned.

Long Arrow's jubilant laugh brought his eyes up. He saw the stocky chief getting ready to greet a group of young warriors who were descending on him with loud congratulations. But before Long Arrow turned to meet them he aimed his laugh at Swift Pony.

His eyes taunted and said, "See! You have been above us so long, not mingling with us because someday you would be our chief. So busy learning to be chief that you did not make friends. See now what it has gotten you!"

To Swift Pony the decision was crushing and Long Arrow's jubilance unbearable. He turned quickly and pushed through the crowd, ignoring the excited chatter and congratulations of his own faction. He wanted the sanctuary of his own lodge, where he could sooth his injured pride and sympathize with himself for the injustice that had been done to him.

FOR several days Swift Pony saw no one. The tribal council did not meet and his presence wasn't required anywhere in the camp. The sound of Long Arrow's celebration drifted to his tepee, but he ignored it. He sat alone and sulked. In turn waves of indignation, anger and humiliation flowed over him and rankled his soul.

Then suddenly, on the third day, he looked at his inner self and was disgusted. He was a chief, born, bred and trained. Yet look at him! Sulking like a scorned woman! The lessons he had heard so often in the private light of his father's campfire began circulating through his mind. His father's voice repeated them word for word in his mind.

"There is no such thing as a complete victory or complete defeat," he had once said. Now he was saying it again. "Each victory is a mixture of both and the same is true of defeat. And never forget that defeat can be turned into victory by taking immediate advantage of the situation."

Swift Pony had entered his lodge three days before a sour, beaten man whose pride had taken a mortal blow. Now he emerged a chieftian once more.

The first battle was over and he had lost. But now he suddenly realized that he knew his opponent's vulnerable spot. By taking quick advantage of that weakness he could turn defeat into victory. And the victory gained now would be more impressive, gain him more prestige, than a unanimous proclamation would have done upon his return from battle.

* * *

During the next few weeks Swift Pony was gone from the camp often, and for long days at a time. He rode far and searched hard for that which he knew would help him in his final victory. And finally he found it.

The thing for which he had searched was a piece of seasoned, strong wood that was without a flaw, from which he could carve himself a new bow. He rode back to his tent with the wood after he found it and set to work immediately.

Laboring carefully, he carved the bow from the wood and fitted the strongest gut he could find to it when the carving was finished. When the job was done, Swift Pony was pleased. He drew it and twanged the gut and discovered that it had more power, more resilience, more flexibility than any bow he had ever owned or seen.

Later, in a patch of woods near the camp, Swift Pony tried his new bow. The results were far above his expectations. He now had greater range and greater accuracy than he had ever had before, and far better than anything Long Arrow had ever displayed. He continued to shoot, getting the feel of his new weapon.

His spirits began to rise. Coupled with such a bow, his own natural ability and his desire to win would beat Long Arrow in the shooting contest. As that was the only contest in which Long Arrow was superior to him, such a victory would win him the chief's position.

As he was retrieving the last of his arrows, Swift Pony noticed for the first time that a man had been standing among the trees in back of him, observing his shooting. A quick glance and the familiar outlines in the shadows of the forest identified themselves to him. Long Arrow had seen him shooting.

When the wind rustled the trees and let a momentary shaft of sunlight knife through the shadows to illuminate Long

Arrow's face, Swift Pony saw the emotions there. Long Arrow, he knew now, understood what the bowmanship he had just witnessed meant. Hate, fear, jealousy and above all, consuming rage contorted his features.

Before Swift Pony could move toward him, Long Arrow had spun around and melted into the shadows. He chuckled, picturing the torture that was in Long Arrow's mind now. For a challenger who had gloated so much over a partial victory to be beaten would be the utmost in humiliation. And Long Arrow had seen the presage of his defeat there in the forest that afternoon.

Swift Arrow went to his lodge that night happy.

THE council meeting broke up. Long Arrow had presided along side of Swift Pony and had sulked and objected to every suggestion that was offered. The effect of the knowledge that he would be defeated in the coming games preyed on his temper. Only by sheer force of will did Swift Pony keep the meeting under control, and keep Long Arrow's anger and spite from dissolving it in confusion.

After it was over, Long Arrow disappeared quickly from the scene. Swift Pony stood around, talking to the elders of the tribe for some time and then began his own journey home.

He passed from the council lodge, by the tepees that stood nearby and entered the short stretch of wood that led to his own home. A black overcast hung high in the sky and obscured the moon and the stars, leaving the earth dark. The path he followed wound through a heavy growth of shrubs and then opened out into the little clearing that surrounded his lodge.

He walked half of the path and then stopped, poised in mid stride, to listen. His sharp ears had caught a noise that wasn't of the night. He sensed that something else was present in the woods nearby, but he could see nothing and no more noise came.

Walking more carefully now, Swift Pony continued up the path. He listened at every step but did not hear the noise again. As he passed under a gnarled oak, he paused again. A noise off to his left caught his attention.

Then there was a rustling in the tree overhead. He raised his eyes just in time to see the body of a man hurtling down on him. Instinctively he tried to spin out of the way, but the flying bulk hit him in the shoulders and sent him reeling. He hit the ground hard and knocked the wind out of his lungs.

He rolled over and lashed out with his feet as his assailant dove at him. He heard a grunt and knew that the blow had been felt. In the second that followed, he vaulted to his feet. Again the man's body flew at him, this time low over the ground. Powerful arms wound themselves around his legs and pulled his knees in. Swift Pony crumpled up on the path, face downward.

He drove his elbows backward and tried to twist away from the binding arms at the same time. His left arm crunched against flesh and bone, and his opponent let out a sharp cry. Then he drove his fist hard into the back of Swift Pony's neck.

There was a bright flash in front of Swift Pony's eyes as the blow connected and then everything went hazy for a moment. A mist seemed to rise up from the ground and filter through the trees. At first it was white, but gradually it turned blood red. Somewhere in this red mist was a sharp pain, as if needles were being driven into him, but he could not identify the location or the cause.

The mist began to lift a little. The trees began to show through it again.

Then a moving shadow crossed through the still shapes of the trees and a long, malicious laugh echoed through the forest. The noise brought Swift Pony back to complete consciousness. The laugh seemed to be still reverberating when he sat up.

He started to get up, but a sharp, tearing pain in his ankle tripped him and sent him sprawling again. After waiting a minute for the worst of it to pass, Swift Pony sat up again and examined his right ankle and leg. It was bleeding heavily from a long, open wound that stretched from the lower calf almost to the foot itself. The gash was deep, going in all the way to the bone.

Finding that he couldn't stand, Swift Pony began dragging himself the rest of the way up the path.

THE long gash in his leg healed. But while it was healing Swift Pony stayed in his own lodge. It was impossible to walk on it because it pained so, and the least pressure forced the gaping mouth of the wound open again.

During that time, Swift Pony meditated. It was not difficult to guess who his assailant had been. He remembered the thick, sinewy arms with muscles like knotted branches that had held him. Shoulders and arms like that could only belong to Long Arrow.

At first, when he realized that it was Long Arrow, Swift Pony decided to go before the council and denounce him for his act. Long Arrow would be quickly ostracized from the tribe for it. But almost as quickly as this thought appeared he thrust it aside.

He couldn't actually prove that Long Arrow had been the man who attacked him that night. And if Long Arrow cried out that he was plotting to get rid of him because he wanted chieftainship himself, the council might easily believe it. He himself might be ostracized. At least he would bring the scorn of the whole tribe down on himself.

And, too, running to the council was a coward's way. The man who could not fight his own battles, but had to seek the help of others, was not a fit man to be the leader of the tribe.

He would have to fight it out himself. That became clear to him. And while his leg was healing he let himself be satisfied with the thought that he would avenge himself completely in the coming games. Once they were over, he could take action against Long Arrow.

But after the wound was healed, Swift Pony found that he had not regained control of his leg and foot. He tried to walk and discovered that to walk at all he had to limp. And running was out of the question. The knife had severed the tendon in his heel and walking was difficult and painful.

With this discovery, Swift Pony suddenly saw Long Arrow's whole plan. Watching his shooting that afternoon in the forest, Long Arrow saw that he could not hope to beat him in the next games. To win he had to do something desperate and he had planned carefully.

He had ambushed Swift Pony that night not with the intention of killing him, but to cripple him. Murder would only have brought the wrath of the tribe on himself. This way, Swift Pony could not hope to compete against him and the supreme chieftainship was his.

He had counted on Swift Pony's inability to call on the council for aid. He knew that to do so would have been to admit defeat, and that would go against him in the coming selections. His plan had been well conceived. Swift Pony, when all of this became clear to him, admitted it to himself.

When he limped around the camp, questions were put to him. What had happened? What was that scar on his

(Continued on page 162)

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leg? Would he run in the games? Through it all Swift Pony said nothing. He walked about with hard lines at the corners of his eyes and his lips compressed to hold back the fiery anger within him.

Several times during this enforced silence he passed Long Arrow and caught a gleam in his eyes and a little laughing twist at the corners of his mouth. If he had not been expecting it, he might not have seen the expression at all.

As the day for the new trials loomed closer, Swift Pony gradually relapsed into his sulking bitterness. He had held out the hope that the muscles in his leg might heal so that he could compete. But it became clear to him now that they wouldn't ever heal completely. He had no chance against Long Arrow. He went among his people in scowling silence.

DAY by day little stray bits of conversation drifted his way and told him what was happening in the camp. Everyone in the tribe now knew as he did what the limp meant. Swift Pony no longer was going to be the chief. But Long Arrow was. Long Arrow's popularity rocketed.

At first Swift Pony noticed only that the usual respect paid to him was lacking. Then he caught a snicker or two after he had limped past a group of warriors. Older men studiously looked the other way when he approached. He saw children mocking his limp as they played. And all of it added up into one total effect.

Swift Pony was no longer going to be chief. He could no longer, because of his injury, be among the warriors. He was no longer a man to be considered in the tribe. He had lost their respect and he was an outcast.

At first Swift Pony bore up under the burden. He was bitter, but he steeled himself to the insults. But the slowly growing signs of his lack of authority and respect in the tribe and the knowledge that he could not hope to compete with Long Arrow now drove him more and more into the seclusion of his own tepee.

His manner, once described as proud and chieftan-like, was now called cock-strutting. The laughter had become open and his pride could no longer sustain itself in the face of it. He stayed away from the mocking eyes of his fellow tribesmen.

* * *

The day before the athletic trials Swift Pony did not move from his own doorway. The nearness of the games depressed him even further.

Toward late afternoon a young boy came up the path and told him that a meeting of the council had been held during the afternoon. All of the pent up anger within him exploded.

"A meeting! And I wasn't called! What's the meaning of this? Until the sun goes down tomorrow I am still a chieftan in this tribe!"

The boy memerly shrugged his shoulders and said he didn't know any more than that.

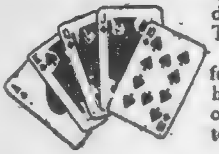
Swift Pony got to his feet and limped down the path toward the rest of the camp, anger written all across his jutting facial bones. He crossed the clearing in the center of the camp and headed for the council lodge. But before he reached it, Long Arrow, surrounded by a group of lesser chiefs, stopped him.

Almost immediately a crowd gathered around the two men.

"Ho, Swift Pony!" Long Arrow called out with a laugh. He accented the first syllable of the name just enough to make it ludicrous. "Are you ready to compete with me in the trials

(Continued on page 164)

IF YOU MUST GAMBLE



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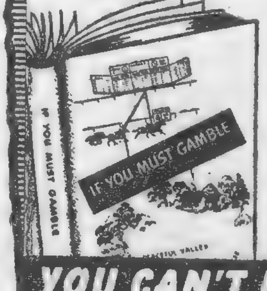

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tomorrow?"

With hot eyes, Swift Pony looked his opponent up and down, then replied angrily, "If I were on my death couch, I would get up and meet you tomorrow, Long Arrow."

There was a little snicker in the crowd. One of the chiefs standing near Long Arrow said, "Long Arrow, you forget that Swift Pony did not see fit to come to the council meeting today."

Long Arrow smiled. "That's right, so I did." He looked at Swift Pony. "I almost forgot that you can't compete tomorrow. I'll have to look elsewhere for competition."

Swift Pony's head snapped up. "I'll compete tomorrow!" he snapped. "And don't forget that you have to beat me before you become chief of the tribe."

Long Arrow shook his head sadly. "No, no, Swift Pony," he said with mock solemnity. "You see, at the council meeting today it was decided that because of your leg you could not compete. You would only injure yourself more. But it was felt that it would be unfair to leave such a *brave* warrior as yourself out of the event entirely." He laid heavy accent on the last sentence.

Swift Pony stood still, glaring at him but hardly daring to breathe.

"You are to be one of the judges tomorrow," Long Arrow spat at him. "You can sit with the old men and help make me chief!"

As soon as the words were out of his mouth he turned without waiting to see their effect on Swift Pony. He strode off laughing with the young chiefs following and left Swift Pony to the mercy of the crowd.

Swift Pony stood still, his face a mask of disbelief. He had never in his life felt so ashamed, so chagrined, so helpless.

The children in the crowd around him formed a circle and began to dance around him, saying. "Old man, old man, old man. Swift Pony is a young old man."

Blindly Swift Pany pushed his way out of the mocking crowd and groped his way back to his lodge. The crowd of children followed him part of the way down the path through the woods before tiring of their teasing. Once inside of his tepee, Swift Pony threw himself on the ground and wept.

Blind rage swelled in him and fought its way out. This was the last shaft, the one that felled the once-proud deer. To be made to sit with the wizened, ancient elders like a cast-off from the

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tribe whose life was spent! For the new Chief Long Arrow! It was all too much.

He thought of the treachery of Long Arrow, but he tried to forget it. That was past now. Everything was past. He was now an old man, a burden on the tribe who sat with the women while the chiefs and braves went out to battle. He was a man who was buried before he was dead.

"I won't do it!" Swift Pony told himself. "I'll not sit with the old men tomorrow!"

But something deep inside of him told him that he would. His honor and his pride had been taken from him. But down inside a spark of courage burned and said that he'd sit with the judges. He'd do it to prove to himself and to every man in the tribe that he still had courage.

THE races were over. The other men of the tribe who had competed against Long Arrow had served only to give him something to beat. With little trouble he made a clean sweep of the day. And once again the scene was repated in the clearing. The whole tribe gathered after the races, the elders formed their own circle at one end, and the victors stood proudly in the middle of the circle.

But today was vastly different from the last meeting. Now only one man stood awaiting his honors in the victor's spot. And another face, a young smooth one that contrasted sharply to the sagging, age-creased faces around it, had been added to the small group at the end of the clearing.

And today there was no long debate on making the the decision. The small, tight circle broke up almost as soon as it formed. The crowd didn't wait tensely, but roared cheer after cheer for Long Arrow.

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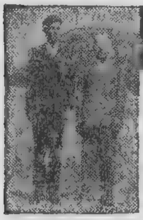

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Slowly out of the small judge's circle, Swift Pony limped toward the center of the circle. His progress was painful, but his face remained stolid, inscrutable, proud.

The voice of the crowd died in the middle of a cheer and all eyes turned to Swift Pony. No one had expected him to leave his tepee this day, and yet he had. And now he was coming forward to award the chieftainship to Long Arrow!

Not one eye rested on the new chief. Everyone turned to watch a proud man take his greatest defeat. They didn't laugh or jibe. It wasn't that kind of a spectacle. They watched him limp out into the barren ground with serious, awed eyes.

Admiration and respect flashed across the faces of the watchers for a man who could publicly admit defeat. With firmness of character and courage he had sat with the ancients and rendered the decision with them, and now he was going to crown the new chief.

It was a fine, brave sight, the utmost act of bravery on part of a courageous man. Emotions worked on every face.

Every face except Long Arrow's. He stood waiting for Swift Pony with his arms folded and a smile stretched across his face. It was the same taunting smile that Swift Pony had seen before. Long Arrow's enjoyment of his one time opponent's position wasn't concealed. He had worked for this minute and now that it was here he savored it to the fullest.

In respect to the courage of Swift Pony, the crowd had to be silent as death while he limped across the clearing. Now he was in front of Long Arrow and his words rang out clearly in the quiet.

"Hail, great Chief Long Arrow!" The words rang true as a silver bell, with no hint of the feelings Swift Pony concealed within himself. "May you reign long and wisely!"

The crowd remained silent for Long Arrow's answer.

"Thank you, Slow Pony!"

The crowd sucked in its breath. A low growl of disapproval came from their throats. They had just seen a magnificent display of courage and of upright manliness and such an insult, after it, was cruel and uncalled for.

Swift Pony fell back a step, stung. The calm fled from his face and uncontrollable anger moved in. Inside of him a fighting heart suddenly refused to be trod upon any more. A suppressed anger of long building was kindled into a roaring flame within a few seconds.

THE crowd did not breathe, awaiting Swift Pony's reaction.

"Long Arrow," he cried out in a harsh voice that contained nothing but naked emotion, "you have insulted a proud man once too often! I demand that you fight me to the death!"

For a moment there was no answer from the crowd. Then a great swelling howl burst from them. They approved of the challenge.

Long Arrow's face changed. He lost the smile he had held before and in its place was uncertainty. His face worked hard, attempting to find the proper expression, but he gave no answer to Swift Pony.

"What are you waiting for, Long Arrow?" Swift Pony demanded.

The howling tribesmen took up the chant. Swift Pony, by his daring challenge in the face of what he knew must be defeat, had won them completely over to his side. With his lame foot, in the close-in knife battle that such a challenge called for, he could not hope to survive, and they knew it.

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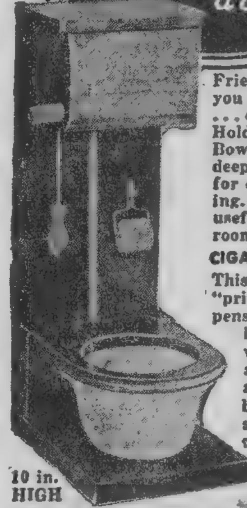

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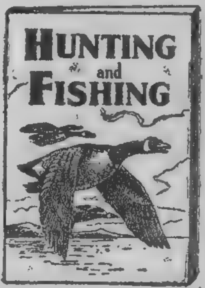

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But the beaten underdog had come back fighting and they loved him for it.

Long Arrow hesitated again before answering. One of the elders came into the circle and the crowd quieted.

"Long Arrow," he said, "you have been challenged. You must fight as befits a chieftan of our tribe or relinquish that honor to one who can hold it with honor." The words were drops of acid that flew through the air and splashed burningly against the new chief's indecision.

"Very well," he answered when the old man had finished. "It is only that I did not want to fight a cripple."

A strip of leather twelve inches long was brought into the center of the victor's circle. The elder commanded both men to come close to him and to draw their knives. Then he placed one end of the leather strip in Long Arrow's mouth and the other in Swift Pony's. Both men bit into it.

"When I say fight," he said so that all could hear it, "you are to begin. The first man to let go of the leather loses."

"Fight!"

The two warriors stood facing each other now, their faces twelve inches apart, their eyes pouring their hatred out across the leather. In their hands were knives poised to strike. It was a brutal type of fighting, where the man who could slash the fastest was the winner, but where most often both men died as a result of the fight.

To Swift Pony death would mean little. He was already an old and useless man in the eyes of the tribe. To Long Arrow death at the moment of his greatest achievement was something he did not want. He had fought and worked too hard to gain his goal.

The tribesmen surrounding the victor's circle stayed outside of its limits, but every neck craned to get a closer view of the battle.

THE signal came suddenly. Swift Pony had spread his feet apart to take as much weight as he could from his injured leg. Long Arrow, at the signal, began dancing, keeping his body as far back as he could. Swift Pony was unable to move around very much.

Long Arrow drove the first knife blow home. It cut into Swift Pony's side just above the hip and ripped a great gash straight up his side to his chest. Swift Pony fell away, but clamped his teeth on the leather harder. He had started a blow and in falling, it had been deflected. Instead of cutting into Long Arrow's body, it tore the inside of his right arm from the wrist to the elbow.

Long Arrow brought his arm up fast to get it away from Swift Pony's driving knife and then brought it down in a slashing blow at the side of his opponent's neck. Swift Pony tried to dodge the swooping blade, but his crippled foot refused to move.

But Long Arrow's right hand could not hold on to his knife. The blow landed against the left side of Swift Pony's neck and cut the skin and then the knife fell to the ground. The muscles of his forearm were helpless.

At the same time Swift Pony drove his knife straight up in an underhand motion and buried it to the hilt in Long Arrow's side. With a gagging gasp Long Arrow jumped backward, letting go of the leather band. He staggered a few paces and then fell to the ground and rolled over on his back, the knife still protruding from his side, the while he jerked to and fro convulsively.

Swift Pony followed him relentlessly and jumped him as soon as he was on his back. He sat astride his fallen foe and watched his face contort in pain and fury. Then he pulled his knife from Long Arrow's side.

Carefully, with a smile on his face,

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he put the tip of the sharp blade to the new chieftan's throat and slowly began pressing the point home. He watched it cut the skin and saw the first blood come. It started in tiny drops that ran down the skin and left a red track behind them and then gradually became a steady stream.

As the blade drew blood, Swift Pony looked into Long Arrow's eyes. All the fire and contempt had left them and only a vacant stare of terror remained. Long Arrow's mouth worked spasmodically, as if he were asking Swift Pony for mercy.

The blade bit deeper as Swift Pony pressed it slowly down. A gurgle of fear whimpered on Long Arrow's lips, and Swift Pony knew in this moment of triumph that all the insults and indignities of Long Arrow had been avenged. It but remained to push the knife home. . . .

And then suddenly Swift Pony laughed. He laughed into the fear-crazed eyes of Long Arrow, for he knew that he had it in his power to hand Long Arrow the supreme insult—to hand him back his life, a life torn of pride, empty and haunted.

Swift Pony straightened and drew the knife away from Long Arrow's throat. He stepped over the fallen Chieftan's shivering body and dropped the knife into the victor's circle.

Then, his head held high, he slowly limped toward the waiting elders, and the place they had made for him in the center of the Council.

COMING NEXT ISSUE

The MAGNIFICENT CABALLERO

By
BERKELEY LIVINGSTON

ON SALE DECEMBER 6

PREACHER'S SON

By

DWIGHT V. SWAIN

THE man with the shifty eyes jerked his head toward the kid who sat at the poker table on the other side of the big barroom.

"There's our sucker," he muttered, talking out of the corner of his mouth to the painted jezebel beside him. "He's just a brat not dry behind the ears yet, but he's got *mucho dinero* on him."

The woman cast an apparently casual glance toward the smooth-faced, blue-eyed boy her partner indicated. "How'll we work it?" she queried.

"Same as usual. Get him into your room. Then I'll bust in an' play the outraged lover. He'll fork over every dollar he's got to keep me from avengin' my honor by killin' him. Now get movin'. We got no time to waste."

"Don't you worry 'bout *me* wastin' time," the woman laughed cynically as she moved off toward the poker game and her victim. "Just you be there with your guns loose."

The kid was easy. He walked into the trap like a rabbit into a snare. Soon the jade had him in her room. Her clothes were disarrayed, her hair mussed. And then the door burst open. There, six-shooter in hand, jaw set hard, eyes flaming with faked rage, stood her partner, the shifty-eyed gent who was so low he'd stoop to anything, even this, for a few dirty dollars.

With a little scream of pretended panic, the girl backed into a corner. The handsome youngster she had lured here stood gaping, blue eyes wide.

"So!" roared the man. "This is what goes on behind my back! Well, I'll take care of you as soon as I've killed this chiseling skunk." He glared ferociously at the kid.

"Oh, no! Please don't kill him!" gasped the woman, acting her part to perfection. "It's not his fault. He's just a boy. I got him into this."

The thug snorted. "You don't think I'm goin' to let him get away with foolin' around my gal, do you? I ought to shoot him in his tracks."

"Oh, no! Take his money; that'd be punishment enough. Do anything. Only don't kill him!"

The man looked from the woman to the boy, as if having a hard time restraining his urge to kill. "Oh, all right, then," he grated finally. "I'll let you go this time. Hand over every nickel you got, kid, and don't let me find you in town half an hour from now."

Wide-eyed and trembling, the boy fumbled in his pockets. The two human vultures who had framed him exchanged a knowing glance. What a laugh this was! Why, the kid was so scared his teeth were almost chattering. He could hardly get the fistful of gold and silver out of his pocket.

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"Here, take it," he whimpered, holding out the money. A couple of coins slipped through his fingers, rolled across the floor. With a sneering laugh his captor stooped to pick them up. For the barest fraction of a second his attention left the youngster.

The kid's hand was a blur of speed as it flashed to the butt of his Colt. The frightened innocence was gone from his face and his mouth was twisted in a killer's snarl. Frantically, his opponent tried to rear back into shooting position. He wasn't fast enough. The kid's gun roared and a black hole spotted the shifty-eyed man's forehead.

The woman was screaming hysterically, the kid's harsh laugh still echoing in her ears, when men from the saloon downstairs burst in. They were too late to be of any help: the *hombre* on the floor was dead, and John Wesley Hardin, the innocent-appearing, good-looking youngster who was destined soon to write his name in blood across the page of frontier history as king of killers, had already forked his horse and headed out.

He was only 17, was Wes Hardin, but this bit of gunplay down in Kosse, Texas, brought the notches on his Colts to eight. Named John Wesley after the founder of Methodism, he was Texas born and bred, the son of a frontier preacher. And, behind his harmless appearance, he hid the cold nerve and lightning speed on the draw that for years made him the most dangerous man in the west.

He had gone on the prod first when he was 15, after killing a Negro in those turbulent times that followed the Civil War. From that day forward his blazing sixes barely had time to cool between shooting scrapes.

Arrested at Longview, Texas, and charged with a killing, young Hardin was headed for Waco for trial. Two guards rode with him. Like many another, they made the mistake of judging him by his age and demeanor. After all, what could a kid of 17 do against two armed men?

Unbeknownst to them, Wes had an ancient Colt hidden under his shirt. When one of the guards went to get feed for the horses, the boy whipped out the gun. The remaining guard, who fancied himself something of an expert when it came to shooting, started to draw. He was dead before his pistol cleared the holster.

FREE, Wes rode for home. He did not stay long. His old preacher father, broken-hearted though he was over his lobo son, realized that for the boy to stay in Texas meant death. He told Wes to head for Mexico.

On the way, three of the hated state police of Reconstruction days captured him. Desperate, but steady as a rock, the young outlaw waited until they camped for the night. Then, as the sentry dozed, he got hold of a double-barreled shotgun and a six-shooter. With cold-blooded efficiency he blasted two of the troopers with the shotgun, the third with the revolver. Again he went home.

"They've arrested me for the last time," he told his father grimly. "From now on it ain't goin' to matter whether they got the drop on me or not. I'll shoot it out anyhow."

He kept that promise down through the years, with tragic results for those who crossed him. He was more deadly than any rattlesnake. Constant practice made him so fast on the draw that he could get his gun out faster than a lesser man who had him covered could pull the trigger.

Wes proved his boast when a colored policeman surprised him in a grocery store. The Negro's aide was waiting outside.

"Hand ovah them guns," the officer who had caught young Hardin ordered, his own cocked revolvers focussed on Wes' midriff.

The youngster obeyed, extending his Colts butt-foremost, holding them with his forefingers through the trigger-guards. The Negro reached for them. Like a flash Wes' hands jerked in the deadly "double roll." The guns spun 'round on his fingers. They were crashing almost before the butts slapped into his hands, and the policeman pitched to the floor dead, his own cocked pistols still unfired. The other officer fled without even looking to see what had happened.

To keep himself in funds Hardin gambled and punched cattle. More or less incidentally, he ran his kill-tally higher and higher. Today it was a Mexican monte dealer who incurred his wrath. Tomorrow it was an Osage brave, part of a raiding band that stole the gunman's bridle. The day after that, a local bad man who thought he was better than he was.

1871 found the youth in Abilene, Kansas, shipping point for the long-horned cattle from the Texas ranges and end of the road for the Texas trail-drivers. Here he met Ben Thompson, another notorious killer from the south. Thompson was anxious to see "Wild Bill" Hickok, then marshall of Abilene, in his grave. On the other hand, he had no hankering to try to do the job himself. Instead, he suggested that his young friend Wes—now 18, and with more than 20 dead men to his credit—take care of the matter.

Just what happened between the owlhooter and Wild Bill at Abilene is not too clear. Hardin claimed he pulled his famous and deadly "double roll" on the marshall, disarmed him, and made him "eat crow." Hickok's friends, in turn, denied the story. At any rate, Wes killed a couple of men, then rambled back to Texas. Wild Bill stayed on as marshall for a while, eventually resigning to go looking for greener pastures.

But everywhere the young outlaw went it was the same: There would be trouble over something and guns would come out—and Hardin's was always blazing first.

FINALLY he holed up in Gonzales County, Texas, where many of his friends and relatives lived. Although he was in danger every minute—was even wounded on a couple of occasions—, and scores of warrants were out for his arrest, his

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friends had enough influence to keep him out of jail most of the time. He continued to add notches to his guns, however, including one for the sheriff!

But on the boy's twenty-first birthday—May 24, 1874—trouble moved in. With at least 39 killings already booked against him, he rode his luck too far.

A deputy sheriff from Brown County, Charlie Webb, came to Comanche, where Wes was hanging out at the moment. Rumor had it that he planned to take the wary young gun-fighter's scalp home with him.

It was night and Wes was in a saloon when Webb finally found him.

"Lookin' for someone?" Hardin asked softly, his blue eyes steely as he noted the deputy's twin six-shooters.

"Who, me?" Webb asked, laughing nervously. "O' course not, Wes. Why would I be lookin' fer anyone?"

Hardin grinned unpleasantly. "Oh, I just heard a few things. But if you're not—, why, here, have a drink!"

Together they walked to the bar. As they turned, Wes let his attention wander for an instant.

"Look out!" someone yelled.

The outlaw whirled. Webb had a gun out and was already shooting. His slug smashed into Hardin's side. Despite it, the other whipped out his own .45, fired once. Webb was dead before he hit the floor, a bullet through his brain.

The killing made things too hot for Wes and his friends. A mob lynched a number of his relatives and companions, and the handsome young killer decided to travel again. For three years he ranged across the south, running saloons, gambling, buying and selling timber and liverstock—and, as usual, killing.

Then, one day, the Texas Rangers—who replaced the old state police—picked up his trail. They seized him before he could touch his guns, down at Pensacola Junction, Alabama. And, depite all his frantic efforts to escape, they took him back to Texas, where he was tried for the shooting of Charlie Webb and sentenced to 25 years in the penitentiary.

Finding he could not escape from prison, Texas' most famous gunman settled down to studying—of all things—theology and, later, law! On February 17, 1894, he was released. Shortly thereafter he was given a full pardon. Becoming a lawyer, he eventually moved to El Paso.

There had been trouble between Wes and a constable named John Selman over the arrest of Hardin's mistress for carrying concealed weapons by Selman's son, also an officer. The elder Selman, who had no mean reputation as a gunman himself, finally went hunting for the ex-owlhooter. Walking into the old Acme Saloon on San Antonio Street, where Hardin was drinking, he shot him once through the head, once through the body, once through the arm—and all three times in the back. Tried for murder, he was promptly acquitted, largely due to Hardin's reputation as a dangerous killer.

Thus—boots on—died John Wesley Hardin, preacher's son, outlaw, self-appointed executioner of nearly half-a-hundred men, and king of all the Texas killers who ever rode the owlhoot trail!

* * *

LITTLE LUKE

ONE of the toughest, yet weakest-appearing hombres the Wild West could boast of in the old days was "shootin" Luke Short. Born in Arkansas in 1854, he never grew taller than five feet four inches, a quiet, mild-mannered and colorless little man who turned out to be one of the surest and most respected killers of the old West.

Short did very well as a professional gambler. His looks were so deceiving that he found plenty of suckers for his excellent judgment in respect to the percentages of chance. Bullies, trouble-makers, and card sharps usually ended up with a neat bullet hole between the eyes when they tried to tamper with Little Luke. After working Leadville for a while, he moved on to Tombstone. His table was always crowded; suckers were plentiful among the "money-happy" miners. When Storms, a local bad man and bully, tried to break up Luke's game one night, he got the usual bullet between the eyes. It was then that Short was dubbed the Undertaker's Joy. His reputation as a crack shot made it unnecessary for him to draw his gun again in Tombstone.

Moving on again, he settled in Dodge City. With two other men he opened a saloon and gambling hall, even went so far as to install a three-piece band. Men and money poured into the place because Luke had the reputation of being honest in all his dealings . . . a rare quality in those days. The mayor of the town ran a rival saloon and passed an ordinance prohibiting music in such establishments. Luke let his band go, and was surprised to find out a few days later that a five piece band was entertaining Mayor Webster's customers. The next night there was music issuing forth from both saloons. Then the mayor had Luke arrested and hustled out of town without trial. Short didn't like being pushed around; he rallied his famous sheriff pals to the cause. Both Bat Masterson and Wyatt Earp escorted him back to Dodge where the Mayor was only too eager to be nice to him.

Before long it was Short who was running the town; six of his personal friends were holding deputy positions. The mayor's plea to the governor of Kansas for troops to "restore order" was denied. Then in 1884 Short, tired of Dodge City, moved on to Fort Worth.

It took one demonstration there, the shooting of Jim Courtright—ex-convict turned racketeer—to establish Short's growing reputation in that section of the country. Surprisingly enough, this man who lived such a turbulent life, and was the participant in so many gun battles, died peacefully of illness in 1893.—*R. Clayton.*

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THE COURAGEOUS CHIEF GALL

By CARTER T. WAINWRIGHT

A STRING of events that were much out of the ordinary foretold the coming distinction of Chief Gall, leader of the Sioux tribe. From childhood to old age he exhibited himself as an intelligent, fearless, and staunch defender of the rights of his people. During the period when they were being unjustly dispossessed of their land by our government, he served not only as their great leader in defense but also as their backbone in the preservation of their high morale. Physically impressive, keeping himself always in prime condition, and mentally alert, with a deep interest in everything around him, he was highly respected both by Indian and white man.

As a child, while on the Dakota prairies with the hunting Sioux people, he experienced an unforgettable ride on the back of an Eskimo dog. While carrying the boy the dog outdid his companions and bravely caught a fierce rabbit to the great delight and praise of the boy and the members of the tribe. At that time an old tribesman prophesied the boy's future greatness.

During his youth, Gall entered many kinds of endeavors in preparation for the task of leadership ahead of him. The perfection he achieved enabled him to shine high above his companions. In a wrestling match with Roman Nose, a Cheyenne boy of great strength, Gall forced Roman Nose down finally after an extensive encounter.

Chief Gall deserved his position of leadership. Not only did he posses strength of mind and body, but also he displayed a highly amiable disposition which made him fully accepted as a leader by the members of his tribe. With all this he was equipped with the additional ability to take over in an emergency. On the spur of the moment he could organize effectively, and so enable his people who so confidently followed him to attain many types of victory. During his leadership he engaged in many courageous exploits that publicized his qualities. But most great of all was the manner in which he led his people in their last stand against the government that claimed their lands. After a last brave defense of the land which he and his people had lived on for generations, he applied to the Canadian government for help which was denied him. The only thing left to do was to acknowledge defeat by reporting to the government fort in Montana in 1881. Here he and his people were held as military prisoners, and soon sent to an Indian reservation.

Ironically, some time later "Buffalo Bill" asked Chief Gall to be one of the attractions of his first show. Gall angrily replied: "I am not an animal to be exhibited before the crowd."

MOUNTAIN MADNESS

By

GARY LEE HORTON

A CURIOUS controversy has been raging in the West for more than one hundred years. It concerns the naming of a mountain. On May 8, 1792, Captain Vancouver had named a mountain for his friend, Rear Admiral Rainier. All nations accepted Vancouver's reports as authentic, and as he was the first responsible scientific explorer of the region, the names he placed on his charts came into general use. They found their way onto all later maps and charts of the Great Northwest.

The trouble began in the nineteenth century when Winthrop, a famous New Englander, traveled through the West. When he came upon this mountain he voiced the opinion that the name of Rainier was not as suitable as an Indian title, such as Tacoma, might be to this monument of nature. Whether this remark was ventured idly or with serious intent, the idea was taken up by others.

A town grew up in full view of the magnificent peak, a town which took the name of Tacoma. Curiously people began to fight for the idea of changing the mountain's name to match the name of the town. The railroad took the first meaningful step in this direction; in their guide books they shifted the title to Tacoma.

Public meetings were held to demonstrate the weight of public opinion, but to no avail. In 1899, a blow occurred to greatly hinder this strange crusade. The Congress of the United States set off the region around the peak officially listing it as Mt. Rainier National Park. But the men of this western region remained stubborn to the core. The people of Tacoma literally stood against the world in pushing forward their desires. About 1910 they began to take the offensive. The fight had become a local tradition about this time, a tradition that had been taken up by succeeding generations. Parents had passed on the idea to their children.

All kinds of literature was circulated on the subject of the controversy. Rainier was slandered. Poems and books were written; one had the astounding title, "The Mountain that was God." The cause was debated for with a fervor approximating religious fanaticism.

In 1917 the controversy lit up the Washington legislature; in 1924 the senator from Washington brought up the subject on the floor of Congress. The Committee of Public Lands held hearings, but nothing ever came of them, and gradually the idea died out.

Traveling in Tacoma, even today, one is apt to hear a "native" call his neighboring mountain something that is not printed on any map. Mt. Rainier is still Mt. Tacoma to many a stubborn old timer!

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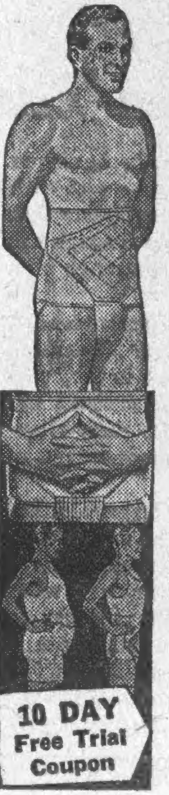

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